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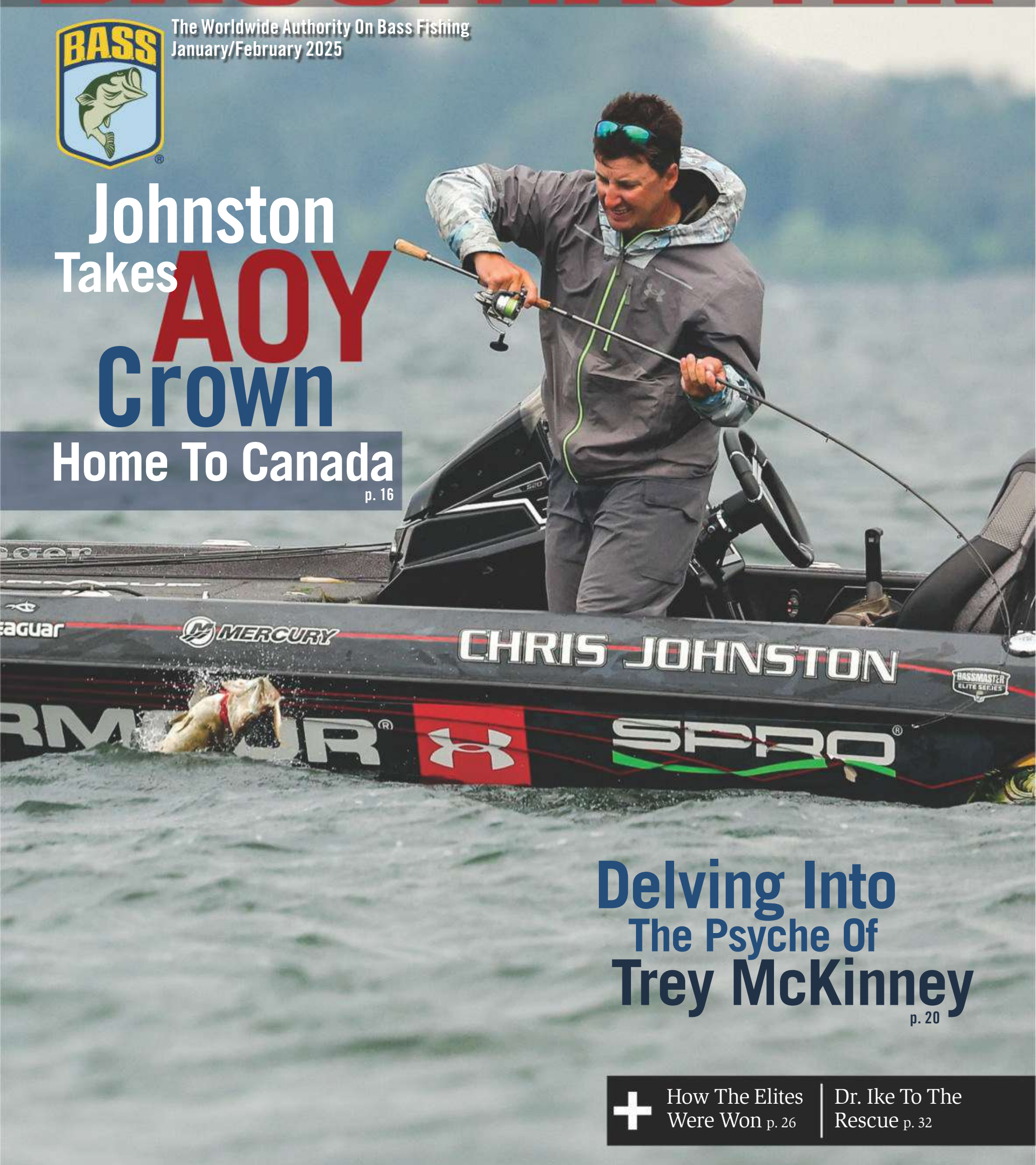
January/February 2025



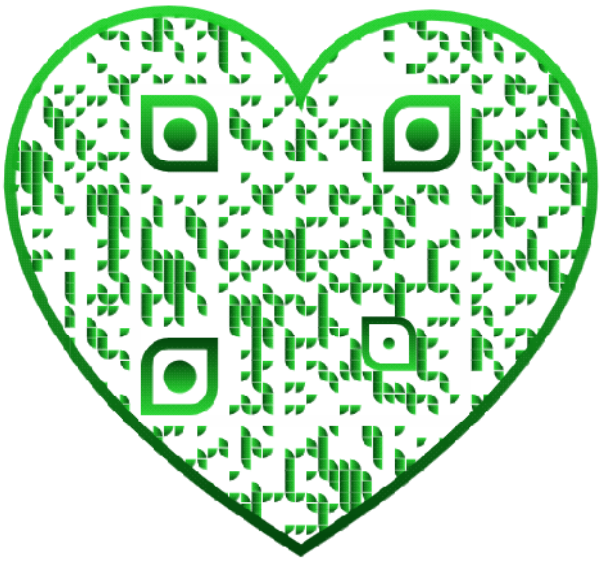
Johnston Takes AOY Crown

p. 16

Delving Into The Psyche Of Trey McKinney

p. 20

+ How The Elites Were Won p. 26 | Dr. Ike To The Rescue p. 32



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Volume 58, No. 1

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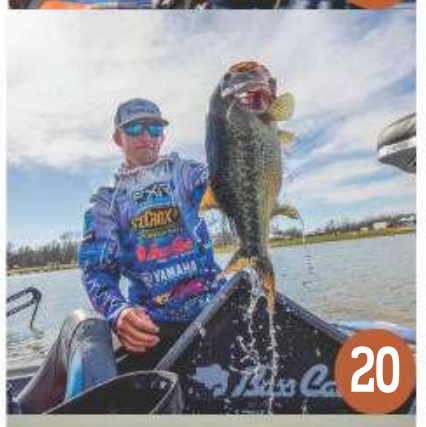
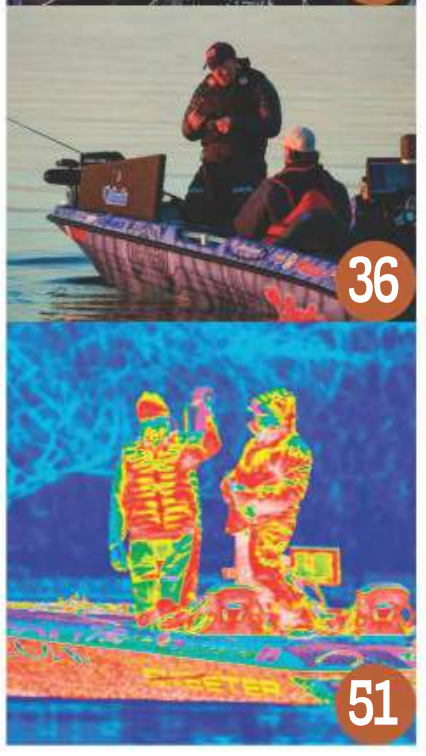




16 **Canadian Supremacy**
Chris Johnston's winding path to the ultimate bass-fishing prize.
BY LOUIE STOUT

20 **Inside The Mind Of Trey McKinney**
As a fearless teenager, the Illinois rookie seemed wise beyond his years in 2024 — and it seems safe to assume that his best years are still ahead of him.
BY CRAIG LAMB

26 **Winning Ways: The Path To 2024 Elite Victory**
From old-school tactics to cutting-edge techniques, the best anglers in the world highlighted the lures and patterns that will catch fish right now. **BY LOUIE STOUT**

32 **Philadelphia Dreaming**
In the face of hard times, a "never give up" booster shot from Mike Iaconelli can be just what the doctor ordered.
BY JOE CERMELE

36 **Beat The Big Chill For A Personal Best**
Nippy weather can drain your desire to fish, but rest assured, your new PB is out there.
BY DR. TODD A. KUHN

42 **World Record Controversy?**
World records were once decided by the numbers on a scale. But in this modern world, things have gotten much more complicated.
BY KEN DUKE & JOSH SAKMAR

46 **Calling Their Bluff**
Fishing is a lot like poker whenever you go. But fish hold their cards especially close to the vest during winter. **BY DAVID A. BROWN**

51 **Wintertime Warmup In the South**
All of a sudden the winter weather has gotten more bearable. Time to go bass fishing. **BY LOUIE STOUT**

56 **Day On The Lake, John Garrett**
The Tennessee pro and former college star tackles unpredictable late-winter conditions. **BY DON WIRTH**

BASSMASTER
Volume 58, No. 1

Departments

11

SHORT CASTS

8 **On The Hook** | Get to know Elite Series pro Tyler Williams and learn how he got his start fishing and his advice for anyone just setting out on their fishing journey.

9 **Datebook** | Mark your calendars for upcoming special holidays.

9 **On The Tournament Trail** | Keep an eye out for where the Bassmaster Tournament Trail is headed in January and February.

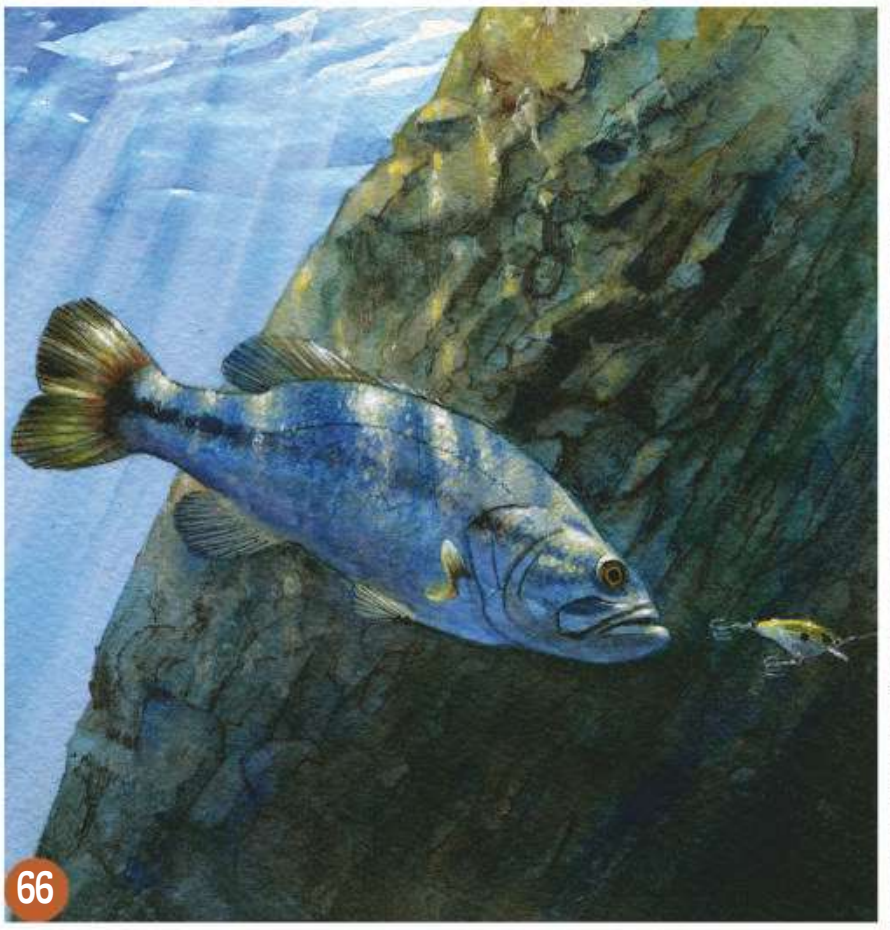
9 **B.A.S.S. City, USA** | Learn about Palatka, Fla., host city of the 2025 Bassmaster Elite Series season-opener at the St. Johns River to be held February 20-23.

9 **State Of The Nation** | Oklahoma angler Blake Capps took the trophy at the 2024 Mercury B.A.S.S. Nation Championship on Grand Lake presented by Lowrance last October.

DO IT YOURSELF

11 **Bass Boating** | Experts answer questions from our *Bassmaster* readers.

11 **What's It Worth** | Find out what your antique fishing items are worth.


66

WHAT WORKS NOW

9 **BassForecast** | Curious as to the best fishing times this month? Get a detailed breakdown of the best times to hit the water.

11 **You Ask, Pros Answer** | Elite Series pro Alex Redwine details his strategy for finding fish on rivers during the chillier parts of the year.

12 **Scientific Angle** | Elite pro Kyle Patrick swears some anglers are overlooking an upgrade that can easily elevate their sonar skills. Get in the know about BeatDown Outdoors' bow and console graph mounts and learn how Patrick uses them to increase his screen visibility the low-tech way.

13 **Gear Grab** | It's officially time to transition to your winter color palette. Check out these baits perfect for matching the hatch during the coldest months of the year.

62 **Pattern Of The Month** | Elite Series pro John Cox has a topwater trick for boating winter bass that almost any angler can master in just a few hours.

64 **Triple Threat** | Three Elite Series pros share their approach to hunting green fish in a white wonderland.

66 **Bass Basics** | Elite Series pros break down how they use a little wiggle from a flat-sided crankbait to liven up big wintertime bass.

68

GET SOCIAL

10 **You Write The Caption!** | Submit your best caption and see last month's winning response.

10 **Mail Call** | Readers share their favorite fishing moments.

10 **Twitter Poll** | Learn which big-shock moment of the 2024 Elite Series *Bassmaster* readers found most surprising.

10 **Bass Social** | B.A.S.S. fans react to Elite Series angler and former Bassmaster Angler of the Year Clark Wendlandt's retirement news.

REGULARS

4 **First Cast** | Think Big

6 **Upfront** | Clunn Was Right ... Again

68 **Lunker Club** | New lunkers

70 **Parting Shot** | Unreachable

72 **Back Deck** | Celebrating The 20th

ON THE COVER

After another fabulous season on the Bassmaster Elite Series, Canadian pro Chris Johnston won the 2024 Progressive Insurance Bassmaster Angler of the Year title. It was an honor that seemed in the cards for Johnston from the moment he joined the Elites in 2019. Turn to page 16 to read all about how his season unfolded. Cover photo by Seigo Saito.

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FEDERAL COLUMBIA

1 | FP
211

Think Big

Big Bass. Big Stage. Big Dreams.

During his run to the Progressive Insurance Bassmaster Angler of the Year title, Chris Johnston embodied the B.A.S.S. mantra, catching big fish in front of big crowds and achieving his biggest goals and dreams on the water.

Nothing intimidated him.

Not even really big boats leaving really big wakes to bounce him around.

The Canadian-born angler, who has fished big water all his life, was locked in on big smallmouth during the final Bassmaster Elite Series event of the year on the St. Lawrence River, and nothing — not even a mammoth-sized ocean liner within casting distance of his boat — was going to disrupt his determination.

Chris clinched the AOY title on Day 3 of the event, depositing a $100,000 bonus check in the bank account he keeps jointly with his brother and fellow Elite Series pro, Cory Johnston.

Then their collective weekly winnings doubled to $200,000 when Cory won a $100,000 first-place paycheck of his own.

Chris won just over $257,000 in 2024, and Cory added almost $350,000. During their careers with B.A.S.S., they combined have won just over $2 million.

That's big by any sense of the term.

Photo: Seigo Saito

Clunn Was Right ... Again

ONE OF MY all-time favorite quotes from decades of covering sports — one that a lot of middle-aged folks have come to lean on — was from Bassmaster legend Rick Clunn after he won the 2016 Elite Series event on the St. Johns River at age 69.

Standing before an awestruck crowd in Palatka, Fla., Clunn said, profoundly, "Never accept that all of your best moments are in your past."

That one sentence meant a lot to me at age 43, and it means even more today as I take on a mammoth new challenge at age 51.

I'm only writing this column in the front of the greatest outdoors magazine in history because late last year I was named just the fourth editor of *Bassmaster* Magazine in its illustrious 57-year history. Following in the footsteps of current Bass Fishing Hall of Famers Bob Cobb and Dave Precht and likely future Hall of Famer James Hall will no doubt be the biggest challenge of my life — and it comes during a time when most people would say the word "young" no longer applies to my brittle frame.

Sitting in this chair, wearing these metaphorical shoes, is proof of exactly what Clunn said that day.

I'm only "middle-aged" if I manage to reach my 102nd birthday — and yet, here I sit with not only the greatest opportunity of my life, but the greatest responsibility outside of being a good father and a good husband.

Millions of people around the world have relied on this publication for years to learn how to catch more and bigger fish. Some of the biggest names in the history of competitive fishing wouldn't be nearly as big if they hadn't graced the cover, and up-and-coming young guns still become stars today for the same reason.

I was responsible for exactly none of that. It was all done by the mega-talented people I mentioned above.

They have merely entrusted it to me with instructions to not only avoid driving the Ferrari off the road, but to shine it up like new.

That's the plan.

I want people to expect the same things they've always gotten from *Bassmaster*. I want them to hear about new lures and techniques here first and plan out-of-state trips to new fisheries because of the words printed in these pages.

I want them to feel like they know the anglers on the Bassmaster Elite Series because they met them between these two covers and grew to see them as part of an extended family through the years.

But I also want to use this opportunity to restore some civility to the world of fishing during a time of division. These days, we're dragged down by too many outside influences — people more concerned with padding their own egos and maintaining the division for their own selfish gain.

I want this magazine to be the first to warn you about those viruses so that you can vaccinate yourself against them and we can all get back to respecting one another like we did for so many years.

So, let's look forward and not back.

Let's all form a unified front, whether we're using forward-facing sonar or an old Humminbird flasher.

I'll keep the words of Rick Clunn at the forefront of my mind as I embark on this journey — and I'll remind myself every day that after he uttered those words, he won the same event again at age 72.

"Let's all form a unified front, whether we're using forward-facing sonar or an old Humminbird flasher."

Johnny Morris

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On The **Hook** By JOE SILLS

Tyler Williams Belgrade, Maine

Let's talk about the biggest news in bass fishing this year: no entry fees on the Elite Series. How does that make you feel?

It was so much to wrap my head around in the moment. I was checking my email looking for updated rules and all of a sudden that came through. I almost feel like I haven't been in the sport long enough to know how it's going to affect everything, but it's definitely exciting. I think as the years go on it will morph into something even better.

You started bass fishing because of YouTube. Talk to us about how that happened.

Yeah, I did. I was watching a lot of Dave Mercer's show, *The Facts of Fishing*, growing up. He really appealed to me because he was one of the few people fishing in more Northern areas like where I'm from. He was good at what he did, so it was entertaining.

That was the gateway. I was watching for entertainment, and I remember one episode where he was fishing a small pond and throwing a jig around. I realized that it was like a lot of places around me, so I decided to go try it. I went to Dick's Sporting Goods and bought a rod, a reel, some line and a jig. I went out to a pond near my house in Maine, and on the first cast I ever made I caught a 5-pounder.

Do you feel like learning skills off of YouTube is more common now than older anglers might think?

Yeah, I do. You can learn almost everything you need to learn there. You will learn all of the baits and techniques, but you will miss the little touches. I think those come from being on the water.

What advice would you give someone 10 years younger than you that's starting to get interested in bass fishing?

I'd probably tell them to focus on fishing. There are a lot of clouds over the sport, and there is an opinion everywhere you look, but I didn't listen to anyone's opinions. I just did what felt right.

On the water, you were part of a furious Lake Fork event that saw 10 anglers top the 100-pound mark last year. You boated 124-9 and took home $25,000. What was it like?

I'm not usually on the good side of those slugfests. But going into it I knew I was going to swing as hard as I could. I didn't know how crazy it was going to be.

As it went on, I turned into not thinking about the tournament as much because I was having the time of my life. I was just trying to catch the next big fish because of how fun it was. Toward the end, I knew I was doing well, but things were getting so out of hand that I knew it was going to be what it was, no matter what happened.

By The Numbers

Age: 23 | Total Tournaments: 31 | Classic Appearances: 1

Top 10 Finishes: 7 | Times in the Money: 19 | Top 30 Finishes: 15

Total Weight: 1,106-7 | Career Winnings: $225,052

SHORT STRIKES

This or that? Get a glimpse into this pro's mindset based on his choices.

Waffle House	IHOP
Tennessee River[1]	St. Lawrence River
Texas	Florida
MLB, NBA, NHL[2]	NFL
Lobster rolls[3]	Gumbo
Smallmouth	Largemouth
College fishing	Opens
Skydiving	Scuba diving[4]
Win AOY[5]	Bassmaster Classic
Fishing in 100° heat	Fishing in 20° cold
Fight one moose-sized duck[6]	Fight 100 duck-sized moose
El Salto	Lake Biwa
Music, Phone	Podcast
Free hotels	Year of free gas
Big bass boat and a '90s Chevy S-10	Johnboat and a Toyota Tundra

[1] Tennessee River, because I like largemouth that like jigs.

[2] Probably baseball. I like playing baseball myself. I'm a Cincinnati Reds fan for no particular reason. I just picked them when I was a kid even though I had never been to a game.

[3] Lobster rolls. I'm from Maine; it wouldn't be right if I said otherwise.

[4] Probably scuba diving. I feel like I'd rather be in the water than in the air. I think I would fall too fast.

[5] AOY. It shows your ability over the year, and coming through the Opens, I felt way better qualifying for the Elites than when I won at Watts Bar.

[6] I've dealt with moose before. They can be aggressive. I think I'd take a moose-sized duck.

By JOE SILLS This Month

DATEBOOK

January

5 National Bird Day. Familiarize yourself with the avifauna living around your favorite waterway by downloading the Cornell Lab Merlin Bird ID app and learning which species are around that you can hear but not see.

20 Blue Monday. Supposedly the saddest day of the year, Blue Monday sounds like a perfect day to head out onto the lake for some midwinter bassin'.

February

1 Car Insurance Day. A reminder to double-check your boat and truck insurance to make sure you're prepared for the unexpected.

17 Presidents' Day. Find more presidents for your fishing habits by telling your bank account to round purchases up to the dollar and automatically put the change in a dedicated bassin' fund.

ON THE TOURNAMENT TRAIL

January

22–23 **Strike King Bassmaster College Series presented by Bass Pro Shops,** Harris Chain, Florida

23–25 **Bassmaster Open,** Clarks Hill Reservoir, Georgia

26 **Strike King Bassmaster High School Series,** Harris Chain, Florida

26 **Bassmaster Junior Series,** Harris Chain, Florida

29–30 **Strike King Bassmaster College Series presented by Bass Pro Shops,** Lake Okeechobee, Florida

February

13–15 **Bassmaster Open,** Sam Rayburn Reservoir, Texas

20–23 **Bassmaster Elite,** St. Johns River, Florida

26–27 **Strike King Bassmaster College Series presented by Bass Pro Shops,** Smith Lake, Alabama

27–March 2 **Bassmaster Elite,** Lake Okeechobee, Florida

BASS CITY, USA | PALATKA, FLORIDA

Host city for the 2025 Bassmaster Elite at St. Johns River, Palatka is one of the most storied small towns in bass fishing. The city of 10,730 sits on the shores of the St. Johns and doubles as a weigh-in site and home base for anglers plying the waters of this legendary Florida fishery.

Travelers hike on narrow boardwalks above the forest floor at Rice Creek Conservation Area, just three miles west of Palatka with trails lined by azaleas, ferns and cypress knees.

310 Length of St. Johns River in miles

98-14 Rick Clunn's winning weight at the 2019 Bassmaster Elite event at the St. Johns

STATE OF THE NATION

28-year-old Muskogee, Okla., angler Blake Capps recently claimed the 2024 Mercury B.A.S.S. Nation Championship on Grand Lake presented by Lowrance. Capps topped an international field of nearly 500 anglers to win a berth in the 2025 Bass Pro Shops Bassmaster Classic presented by Under Armour and an invitation to compete on the 2025 Bassmaster Elite Series. After hoisting the Bryan V. Kerchal Memorial Trophy, Capps — who works as a petroleum operator at a nearby power plant — reflected on the historic moment. "I haven't had a chance to do a lot of competitive fishing because of work and the cost that goes with being a tournament fisherman," he said. "But I'm definitely gonna have to sit down and think about the offer to fish in the Elite Series."

BEST FISHING TIMES

Jan '25	Ratings	Phase	Moon Rise	Moon Overhead	Moon Set	Moon Underfoot
W 1	2.9	●	9:39 am	1:57 pm – 2:47 pm	7:13 pm	1:29 am – 2:19 am
R 2	2.5	●	10:13 am	2:40 pm – 3:50 pm	8:26 pm	2:14 am – 3:24 am
F 3	2.1	●	10:42 am	3:19 pm – 4:51 pm	9:39 pm	2:54 am – 4:26 am
S 4	2.5	●	11:07 am	3:55 pm – 5:51 pm	10:51 pm	3:31 am – 5:27 am
S 5	2.7	◐	11:31 am	11:47 am – 2:07 pm		4:06 am – 6:26 am
M 6	4.6	◐ H	11:55 am	5:05 pm – 7:51 pm	12:02 am	4:41 am – 7:27 am
T 7	2.9	◐ ▾	12:20 pm	5:42 pm – 8:52 pm	1:14 am	5:17 am – 8:27 am
W 8	2.3	◐	12:49 pm	6:22 pm – 9:56 pm	2:28 am	5:56 am – 9:30 am
R 9	2.2	◐	1:25 pm	7:09 pm – 11:03 pm	3:44 am	6:40 am – 10:34 am
F 10	2.8	○	2:08 pm	8:01 pm – 11:59 pm	4:59 am	7:30 am – 11:40 am
S 11	3.8	○	3:02 pm	9:01 pm – 11:59 pm	6:11 am	8:30 am – 12:44 pm
S 12	4.3	○	4:05 pm	10:04 pm – 11:59 pm	7:14 am	9:34 am – 1:42 pm
M 13	6.6	○ F	5:14 pm	12:00 am – 2:05 am	8:06 am	10:41 am – 2:35 pm
T 14	5.9	◑	6:25 pm	12:00 am – 2:52 am	8:47 am	11:45 am – 3:19 pm
W 15	3.7	◑	7:34 pm	12:22 am – 3:34 am	9:20 am	12:46 pm – 3:58 pm
R 16	3.7	◑	8:39 pm	1:20 am – 4:10 am	9:46 am	1:43 pm – 4:33 pm
F 17	2.6	◑	9:42 pm	2:15 am – 4:43 am	10:08 am	2:36 pm – 5:04 pm
S 18	2.0	◑	10:42 pm	3:06 am – 5:14 am	10:29 am	3:26 pm – 5:34 pm
S 19	2.5	◑	11:42 pm	3:57 am – 5:43 am	10:48 am	4:16 pm – 6:02 pm
M 20	3.1	◑ ▴		4:36 am – 6:22 am	11:08 am	4:56 pm – 6:42 pm
T 21	2.0	◑ H	12:42 am	5:26 am – 6:54 am	11:30 am	5:46 pm – 7:14 pm
W 22	2.6	◑	1:43 am	6:17 am – 7:25 am	11:54 am	6:40 pm – 7:48 pm
R 23	2.3	●	2:46 am	7:12 am – 8:02 am	12:22 pm	7:36 pm – 8:26 pm
F 24	2.2	●	3:50 am	8:08 am – 8:44 am	12:58 pm	8:34 pm – 9:10 pm
S 25	2.1	●	4:54 am	9:06 am – 9:32 am	1:42 pm	9:33 pm – 9:59 pm
S 26	2.0	●	5:54 am	10:04 am – 10:26 am	2:37 pm	10:33 pm – 10:55 pm
M 27	2.9	●	6:48 am	10:59 am – 11:27 am	3:42 pm	11:27 pm – 11:55 pm
T 28	4.2	●	7:34 am	11:49 am – 12:31 pm	4:53 pm	12:17 am – 11:59 pm
W 29	4.7	● N	8:11 am	12:35 pm – 1:35 pm	6:08 pm	12:08 am – 1:08 am
R 30	3.4	●	8:42 am	1:15 pm – 2:39 pm	7:24 pm	12:50 am – 2:14 am
F 31	2.9	●	9:10 am	1:54 pm – 3:42 pm	8:38 pm	1:29 am – 3:17 am

BASS FORECAST®
Spot-On Solunar Times™

SOLUNAR RATINGS

TOUGH GOOD
FAIR EPIC

ATTENTION

These Major feeding times are for the GPS Coordinates at the center point of the US.

To get both Major and Minor feeding times for all of your exact fishing locations on your mobile

SCAN HERE NOW!

Feb '25	Ratings	Phase	Moon Rise	Moon Overhead	Moon Set	Moon Underfoot
S 1	2.8	● ▾	9:35 am	2:30 pm – 4:44 pm	9:52 pm	2:05 am – 4:19 am
S 2	2.6	●	9:59 am	3:06 pm – 5:44 pm	11:05 pm	2:42 am – 5:20 am
M 3	3.0	●	10:24 am	3:43 pm – 6:47 pm		3:17 am – 6:21 am
T 4	3.7	◐	10:52 am	4:22 pm – 7:50 pm	12:19 am	3:56 am – 7:24 am
W 5	5.2	◐ H	11:25 am	5:06 pm – 8:56 pm	1:35 am	4:38 am – 8:28 am
R 6	3.2	◐	12:05 pm	5:56 pm – 10:02 pm	2:49 am	5:26 am – 9:32 am
F 7	2.8	◐	12:54 pm	6:51 pm – 11:05 pm	4:01 am	6:21 am – 10:35 am
S 8	2.7	○	1:53 pm	7:52 pm – 11:59 pm	5:06 am	7:23 am – 11:35 am
S 9	4.6	○	2:59 pm	8:55 pm – 11:59 pm	6:00 am	8:27 am – 12:27 pm
M 10	4.7	○	4:09 pm	9:59 pm – 11:59 pm	6:44 am	9:32 am – 1:14 pm
T 11	6.7	○	5:18 pm	10:57 pm – 11:59 pm	7:19 am	10:33 am – 1:55 pm
W 12	7.2	○ F	6:24 pm	12:00 am – 2:08 am	7:48 am	11:32 am – 2:32 pm
R 13	5.4	◑	7:28 pm	12:04 am – 2:42 am	8:11 am	12:26 pm – 3:04 pm
F 14	4.6	◑	8:29 pm	12:57 am – 3:13 am	8:32 am	1:18 pm – 3:34 pm
S 15	3.2	◑	9:30 pm	1:48 am – 3:42 am	8:52 am	2:08 pm – 4:02 pm
S 16	2.5	◑	10:29 pm	2:38 am – 4:12 am	9:11 am	2:57 pm – 4:31 pm
M 17	2.5	◑ ▴	11:31 pm	3:28 am – 4:42 am	9:32 am	3:48 pm – 5:02 pm
T 18	2.5	◑		4:09 am – 5:23 am	9:54 am	4:30 pm – 5:44 pm
W 19	3.7	◑	12:32 am	5:01 am – 5:57 am	10:21 am	5:25 pm – 6:21 pm
R 20	2.5	◑ H	1:36 am	5:57 am – 6:37 am	10:53 am	6:21 pm – 7:01 pm
F 21	3.4	◑	2:39 am	6:53 am – 7:21 am	11:33 am	7:20 pm – 7:48 pm
S 22	2.6	●	3:40 am	7:50 am – 8:12 am	12:21 pm	8:17 pm – 8:39 pm
S 23	2.6	●	4:36 am	8:45 am – 9:09 am	1:21 pm	9:13 pm – 9:37 pm
M 24	2.8	●	5:25 am	9:37 am – 10:11 am	2:29 pm	10:05 pm – 10:39 pm
T 25	3.2	●	6:05 am	10:24 am – 11:16 am	3:43 pm	10:51 pm – 11:43 pm
W 26	4.0	●	6:39 am	11:08 am – 12:20 pm	4:59 pm	11:34 pm – 11:59 pm
R 27	5.7	● N	7:09 am	11:48 am – 1:24 pm	6:15 pm	12:00 am – 12:58 am
F 28	4.3	●	7:35 am	12:25 pm – 2:27 pm	7:31 pm	12:00 am – 2:02 am

On The Line

MAIL CALL

Cameron Bajkowski
Hallstead, Pa.

Michael Moss
Martin's Mill, Texas

Sanders Allen
Owens Cross Roads, Ala.

James & Hayden Lanke
Wisconsin & Iowa

YOU WRITE THE CAPTION!

It's your turn to write a cutline for your favorite magazine. Follow B.A.S.S. on Facebook (@bass) and Instagram (@bass_nation) and comment with a clever caption on this cartoon that will be posted on our feed on Dec. 30, 2024. If your caption is chosen, it will be printed in an upcoming issue.

Last Month's Post

1,667

199

Last Month's Caption Winner:
"Organizing my tackle but I'm still going to throw one colour."

@bh_anglers

Livin' For Fishin'

My father Gary McCall lives, breathes and thinks bass fishing. Some say he might have the looks of one at times. I don't think I have a single memory of him without a rod in hand. I believe it's his peace at times. He's worked his entire life to be able to fish every day. Now that he's retired, with his new bullet bass boat that I don't think is ever not connected to the truck, he can. (He remodeled his basement and tore down walls just to be able to park his truck and boat and not have to disconnect it.)

I have high hopes that you'd find this photo good enough to use in your magazine. He doesn't know I was planning to send this in, but it would make him happier than the day he bought his boat. I know that every time someone is over, he'd show them without even saying hello first.

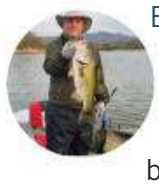
A thankful son,
Garren McCall
Anderson, S.C.

FACEBOOK.COM/BASS

B.A.S.S. fans react to the announcement of Elite Series angler Clark Wendlandt's retirement.

Timothy Hagerich
I had a dead battery in an ever-start tournament years ago when we left for weigh in. You were the only one who stopped to help. A class act and one of the best!!!!

Jimmy Rogers
Congratulations on your long career and accomplishments !! Won't be the same without you representing Texas !!



Brian Jackson
There is no finer fisherman...and Clark is an even better person. Best wishes to him in a well deserved retirement. Everything he has ever done has been to improve the sport we all love. It won't be the same without him. I hope the younger generation follows his example of integrity and service. And it would be nice if they could be as versatile as he is on the water as well!

TWITTER POLL

What was the most surprising moment of the 2024 Elite season?

- **31%** McKinney's dominance
- **32%** Johnston's AOY comeback
- **30%** Taku's Southern win
- **7%** Walters wins again

Turn to page 26 for a detailed account of how all the 2024 Elites were won.

Illustrations: Arturo Gonzalez Murga

Ask The **Experts**

WHAT'S IT WORTH?

By ROB PAVEY

The images below were submitted by *Bassmaster* readers, and our antique tackle expert, Rob Pavey, appraises the value of each fascinating find. To submit yours, email editorial@bassmaster.com.

Sven & Ole's "X-Filets" 1997 novelty lure

Stan Kral, email

$5 to $10 The Miracle Fishin' Loors X-Filets was a rubber novelty bait sold by Sven and Ole's tackle company in the 1990s. It spoofed the popular *The X-Files* science fiction drama series that ran from 1993 to 2002, with a few more episodes in 2016 and 2018. The show chronicled the exploits of FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully as they investigated paranormal activities and extraterrestrial sightings.

Pflueger Skilkast level-wind reel in box

Linda Crocetti, email

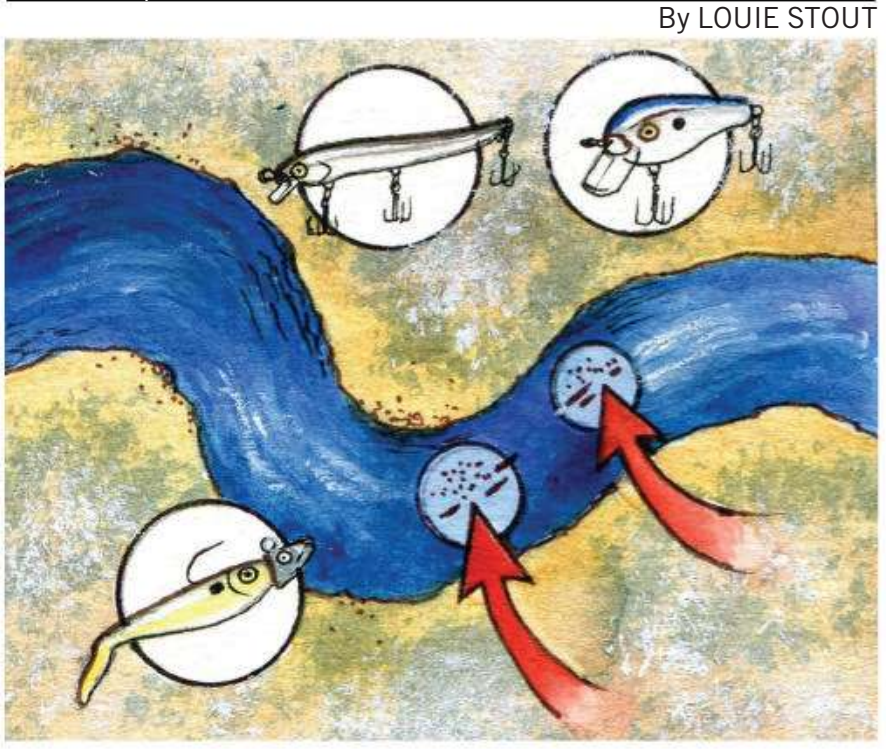
$15 to $20 Pflueger was one of America's oldest and largest tackle makers, with reels and lures dating back to the late 1800s. The Akron, Ohio, company made quality level-wind reels, and the Skilkast was a middle-of-the-road model popular with anglers due to its durability and price. The colorful boxes make these reels even more collectible.

Rob Pavey, a journalist from Augusta, Ga., has collected old fishing lures for more than 35 years and has authored or edited several reference books on old tackle. His educational website is mrlurebox.com.

Illustration: Jonathan H. Milo

YOU ASK, PROS ANSWER

By LOUIE STOUT



I fish rivers in late winter and early spring, but the smallmouth and largemouth are hard to find and catch. Any suggestions of how I can improve fishing rivers that time of year?

Roger Macomb, Athens, Ohio

Bassmaster Elite Series pro Alex Redwine

This is a time of year that the bait-fish group up on the main-river channel. Based upon my experiences on the Ohio River, you'll find the bait — and the bass — in little current breaks and slackwater areas on the river. Creek mouths or rocky banks are good places to look, but the creeks are less productive.

I use a jerkbait or a squarebill crankbait in 3 to 8 feet of water in shad colors. I also like a 2 1/2- to 3 1/2-inch swimbait on an All-Terrain Tackle Smallie Smasher Head in sizes 3/16 to 3/8 ounce, depending on the amount of current.

I've struggled using my forward-facing sonar in shallow water, but I see the pros do it a lot. Is there a minimal depth or specific setting for being able to see bass holding around shallow cover?

Kyle Richardson, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Bassmaster Elite Series pro Luke Palmer

Honestly, the way I learned it is probably the best way: on a farm pond. I had an FFS mounted on my aluminum boat, and I wanted to see what was in there. When I began scanning the bank, I saw a fish lying next to a laydown log in less than 2 feet of water and caught it.

I knew there were only bass in the pond, so that gave me an advantage. I graduated to ponds with crappie and bass, and that taught me how to distinguish the differences in fish species.

Settings are critical. On the LiveScope, I increased the color gain from 80% to 87% to make the fish appear brighter. So, if 'Scoping laydowns or timber like I was doing when I won at Santee Cooper, the fish glowed more than the wood around it. That also helps me see fish sitting on or close to the bottom.

I also run my depth range from 9 to 15 feet and reduce the distance away from the boat to 50 to 60 feet, which magnifies the screen and helps me see things more clearly.

BASS BOATING

By LOUIE STOUT

What can I do to maximize the picture and see my lure better on my forward-facing sonar?

Jakob Willoughby, Belleville, Ill.

In most cases, it's all about power and clean power, says Gary Clouse, owner of Phoenix Boats, a former Bassmaster Elite Series pro and current Bassmaster Opens angler.

Bigger screens and heavy use can lower battery power and affect the images you're seeing on the screen.

If you're using a lead acid battery, he explains, the voltage goes down as the day wears on. A lithium battery keeps its full charge until it's dead, then it just quits.

"Select battery power based upon the size and how many units you are running," he explains. "For example, I use a 135-amp, deep-cycle Dakota Lithium strictly for my LiveScope.

"I've been blown away by what a difference it makes by dedicating that battery to that graph."

Boat wiring can matter a lot more when you're using forward-facing sonar, especially with multiple large screens. Be sure you have adequate wiring between the battery and the electronics without any connections in between that might choke down the voltage.

The heavier the wire gauge, the better the performance. Many older boats lack the proper wiring to handle big and/or multiple electronic screens.

And finally, adds Clouse, you can put your electronics on pause or sleep mode when not in use. This will reduce battery drain.

Products mentioned:

Dakota Lithium batteries — **dakotalithium.com**

Garmin LiveScope — **garmin.com**

Scientific **Angle** By JOE SILLS

ACTIVE ANGLER

Visit virtually any tournament boat ramp in the United States on any given weekend and a swarm of bass anglers will almost assuredly be accompanied by an armada of marine electronics. Today, bass boats with multiple large, multifunction displays capable of displaying side-scan sonar information, real-time sonar readouts and sophisticated marine charts are as ubiquitous as jumpsuits and sponsor patches in the 1970s.

For serious tournament anglers, learning to fine-tune and read those electronics is a skill set as essential as casting. And while the quest for more powerful marine electronics seems never-ending, Bassmaster Elite Series pro Kyle Patrick says many anglers are missing a simple, life-changing improvement: graph mounts.

BLUE-COLLAR BREAKDOWN

Two years ago, Patrick made a switch from factory mounts to a new system designed by BeatDown Outdoors. He traded a standard bow mount for a BeatDown Outdoors The Ultimate Single Pole Double Stack and his console mounts for a BeatDown Outdoors Ultimate Console Mount. For a man that spends hundreds of days per year on the water, the simple changeup has resulted in a competitive advantage: He misses fewer target areas and spots more fish.

"People think about tricks like optimizing their transducer," Patrick says. "They go into the details of battery voltage and zero-degree transducer mounts, but they don't often think about the kind of human errors that are just natural — situations where your eyes aren't looking at info on the screen because they just can't see."

IMMEDIATE IMPACT

Suffice to say the impact of lower-tech equipment looms large in bass fishing. In a world where anglers are constantly clawing for advantages and can win big money, a day spent in the boat shed seems like a small sacrifice for an easy upgrade. Two seasons into his experiment with the adjustable graph mounts, Patrick believes the day he spent swapping them out has paid off on the tournament trail. "The way you're seeing a screen can be the difference in spotting a brush or rockpile with fish on it that could change the way you fish an entire tournament," he says. "I mean, if you scan a brushpile that has 5-pounders all over it and you miss it, you just potentially missed $100,000."

Patrick says both mounts play a role in making his daily life on the water more efficient. While The Ultimate Single Pole Double Stack positions both forward displays on a single, pivoting pole that can be raised, lowered and swiveled to adapt to his physical location, the console mounts enable him to easily adjust for glare while side-scanning for fish. While using live sonar on the bow, Patrick no longer needs to bend down to get a closer look at fine details. In the cockpit, his hands are free to focus on maneuvering.

"You're not having to hold your hand up to the graphs, trying to make sure you're not missing anything. You don't have to change the way you are graphing based on where the sun is or what your boat position is like. It all revolves around you and being where you need to be to see and catch fish."

Product Spotlight

The BeatDown Outdoors Ultimate Console Mount is an ultra-tough, adjustable platform for multifunction displays that allows anglers to move graphs with the flip of a lever. The mount allows each display to move independently from right to left or tilt back and forth to adjust for sun glare. Locking collars allow graphs to be loosened and tightened with ease.

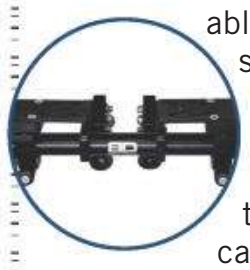
"If someone has a few extra bucks to spend, they can easily install the console mount," Patrick says. "The install is nothing crazy, and they don't have to rearrange the front of their boat to make the switch."

Compatible with Garmin, Humminbird and Lowrance displays, the mount also allows quick removal of displays for secure storage when not in use. MSRP: $600
beatdownoutdoors.com

FUTURE FORECAST

To win any bass fishing tournament, anglers have to fish well. To win on the Bassmaster Elite Series, they have to fish perfectly. For Patrick, that pursuit of perfection means dialing in his electronics is a top priority.

"Technology is not going away," he adds. "Everyone is doing it. Everyone has adopted it. So, to not utilize it would be like going out on the water and not being able to use a spinning rod for finesse baits or not knowing how to use a baitcaster for flipping. That's how essential graphic technology has become."



Patrick says other Elite Series pros have taken notice of the graph mounts. Already, BeatDown Outdoors has a flourishing business that holds multiple patents for the technology, while other boating accessory brands feature designs of their own. In recent months, anglers have popularized zero-degree transducer mounts for live sonar. Nearly every "in the know" angler has deployed one, and Patrick believes the future of adjustable graph mounts is bright.

Aside from their benefits while scanning, Patrick also raves about the graph's ability to create more space in the cockpit. "These displays are getting absurd," he says, laughing. "So, it's great to be able to move the graphs and get out of your seat easier when you come off plane."

Photo: Shane Durrance

Match The Winter Hatch

Z-Man Tungsten ChatterBait Elite EVO

$15.99 | zmanfishing.com

- Extremely effective at mimicking prey of any kind and excels when working shallow cover such as trees and grass
- The Tungsten EVO provides a more compact profile and is designed to dart and hunt in the water. This erratic hunting action helps generate a reaction strike even from picky fish
- The tungsten head allows for the bait to reach depths quicker and produces unique vibration
- It is equipped with a heavy-duty 5/0 black nickel hook and both split grip and wire bait keepers

Rapala Jigging Rap

$7.69 | rapala.com

- A unique bait that has been around forever. The Jigging Rap is a heavy and erratic bait that is deadly for deep, suspended fish
- It was first crafted by Esko Rapala in 1961 and was originally called the Jigging Minnow
- Known primarily as an ice fishing lure, it has proven more recently to be an excellent choice for deep, open water

Deps Sakamata Shad

$10.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

- When outlining baitfish imitators, a soft-plastic minnow for Damiki rigging and using forward-facing sonar must be included. This style of fishing has been dominating the fishing world for the last couple of years
- Built in Japan, the Sakamata Shad has become one of the top soft jerkbaits. Its side fin and shape allow the bait to roll and flash in a very realistic manner
- The Sakamata Shad has a huge selection of six sizes and 28 colors to match any situation

Lucky Craft Screw Pointer

$11.99-$18.99 | luckycraft.com

- A generally underutilized bait, the Screw Pointer gets bit from some of the most lethargic of bass. It is far more versatile than expected
- It is a straight-retrieve bait that casts a mile and excels at covering large expanses of water especially on shallow flats
- The prop blades produce tantalizing vibrations, and the body yields a natural roll action that draws fish in from a distance
- The Lucky Craft Screw Pointer comes in several different size and weight options to match the target species and baitfish size

Spro KGB Chad Shad 180

$61.99 | spro.com

- While the normal consensus is that the majority of baitfish are smaller in the winter, the big bass often still prefer one big meal
- The Spro KGB is a 7-inch bait that provides a high-quality glide-bait without the price tag of a custom bait
- Started as a custom handmade bait by KGB, Spro collaborated to make a mass-produced version and increase its availability. It is created with premium hardware, swiveling bait hangers and Gamakatsu hooks

[More Must-Haves]

6th Sense Provoke 106X Jerkbait
$13.99
6thsensefishing.com

Northland Tackle Smeltinator Underspin Jig
$7.99
northlandtackle.com

Alpha Angler ShAAkr Skipping and Scoping Rod
$347.01
alphaangler.com

True Bass Fishing Diamond A-Rig
$18.99-$23.99
trueswimbaits.com

BOAT/PWC

navigating peace of mind

THE IMPORTANCE OF BOAT INSURANCE

Embarking on the open water is an exhilarating experience, filled with the promise of adventure and relaxation. Whether you're a seasoned sailor or a weekend cruiser, protecting your vessel with proper insurance is not just a choice—it's a necessity. Explore the reasons why every boat owner should prioritize boat insurance for a worry-free voyage.

Unpredictable waters
The open water can be unpredictable, with unexpected storms, collisions, or other potential accidents. Boat insurance can give you financial protection if there is damage to your vessel, providing coverage for repairs or replacement.

Damage and injury
Accidents on the water can result in damage to other boats, docks, or even injuries to passengers. Boat insurance offers liability coverage, which can pay for damages or injuries you're liable for while boating, up to specified limits, and lawsuit costs if you're sued. This includes damage you cause to another watercraft or if someone on or near your boat is injured and you're found to be legally responsible.

Theft and vandalism
Unfortunately, boat theft and vandalism are realities that boat owners face. Boat insurance has comprehensive and collision coverage that can protect you against events outside of your control, including theft and vandalism.

Incurred medical payments
Accidents on the water may lead to injuries for you or your passengers. Boat insurance offers a range of optional medical payments coverage limits, helping to cover medical expenses if you are in an accident or someone is hurt on your boat, regardless of fault.

Peace of mind for financing
If you financed the purchase of your boat, most lenders require insurance coverage to protect their investment. Having boat insurance not only fulfills these requirements but also gives you peace of mind knowing that your financial interests are safeguarded.

Navigational flexibility
Some water municipalities and marinas may require proof of insurance for docking or accessing certain areas. Boat insurance allows you the flexibility to explore different destinations without worrying about entry restrictions.

Emergency towing and assistance
Progressive boat insurance can include optional Sign & Glide® On-Water Towing coverage. If your boat is disabled or breaks down on the water, Sign & Glide® pays for on-water towing, jump starts, soft un-groundings, and fuel delivery.

Wreckage removal
If your boat sinks, Progressive boat insurance will cover the cost of removing your boat from the water (if removal is legally required).

Investing in boat insurance is not just about protecting a valuable asset; it's about safeguarding the memories, experiences, and joy that come with your on-water adventures. Don't let unforeseen circumstances disrupt your journey—navigate with confidence, knowing that Progressive boat insurance has you covered. Ensure a smooth and worry-free voyage, because when it comes to your boat, peace of mind is the ultimate luxury.

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in as little as 4 minutes

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to learn more.

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When time on your boat is like medicine for the soul, rest assured that every precious moment is protected by America's #1 boat insurer—day after day, cast after cast.

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PROGRESSIVE®

Get a quote in as little as 4 minutes

Progressive Casualty Insurance Co. & affiliates. #1 rating based on 2022 boat market share. Data is sourced from Ratefilings.com.

Canadian Supremacy

By **LOUIE STOUT**
SENIOR WRITER

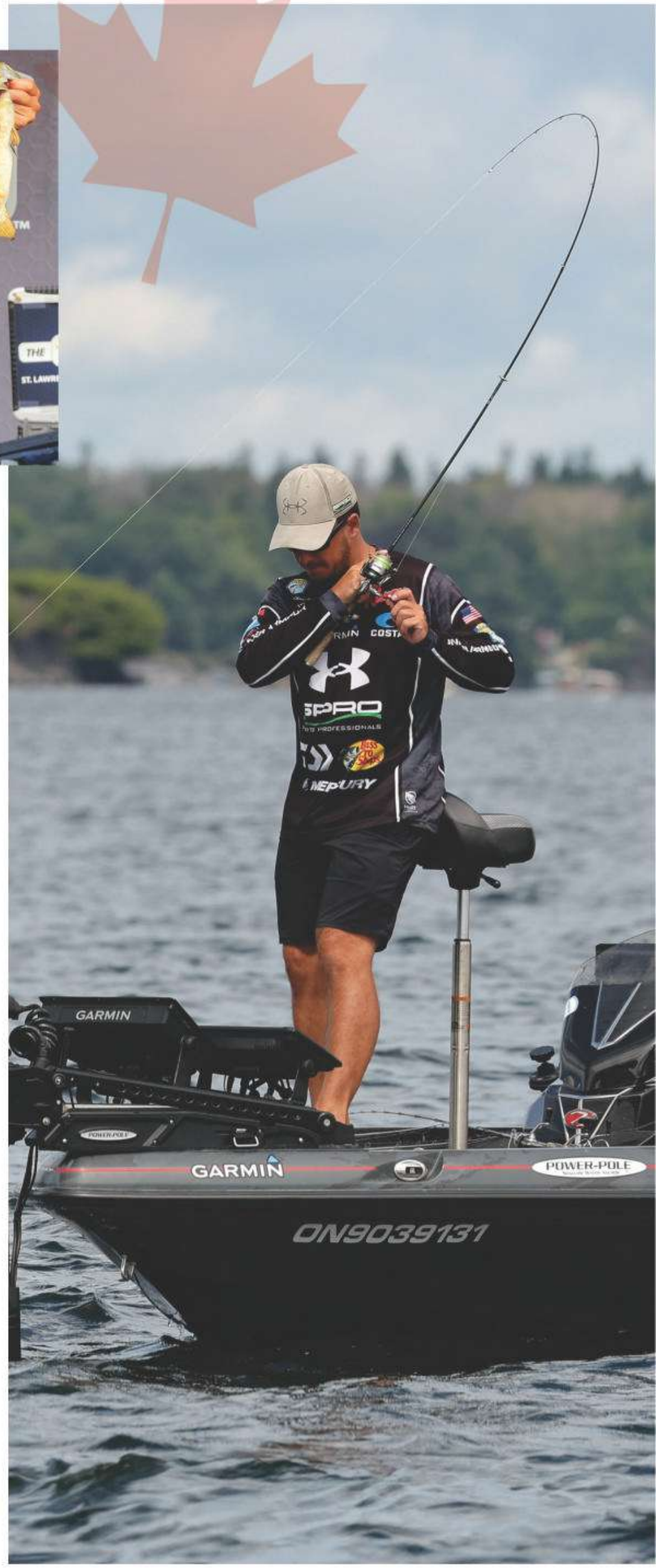
Johnston's winding path to the ultimate bass-fishing prize

NO ONE SHOULD be surprised by Canadian pro Chris Johnston's rapid career ascension to become the first foreign angler to win the Progressive Insurance Bassmaster Angler of the Year (AOY) title.

The man has won on every U.S. circuit he's fished and has proved since his first Bassmaster Elite tournament in 2019 that he was an angler who would be a force for years to come.

During his six-year tenure on the Elite Series, the 35-year-old angler has won one, logged 18 Top 10 finishes, landed in the money a remarkable 60 of 61 events and qualified for every Bassmaster Classic since joining the Elites. His career winnings with B.A.S.S., including Bassmaster Opens, are more than $1 million.

Photo: Shane Durrance



Canadian superstar Chris Johnston seemed destined to win the Angler of the Year title from his first moments on the Elites. He finally made it happen in 2024. Photos: Seigo Saito

Of course, it helps when your 39-year-old brother, Cory, who qualified for the Elites in 2019 as well, is equally a threat. Cory has won two Elite events and over $1 million from B.A.S.S.

Factor in consistent wins in Canadian Opens and nearly $1 million in FLW earnings and it's obvious the Johnston boys know how to catch them everywhere.

They are always a threat when the Elites head north into smallmouth country, but their skills extend well beyond a spinning rod and finesse baits.

"Honestly, I prefer fishing with 65-pound braid, a jig and a flipping stick," says Chris. "That's how I grew up and learned to fish."

There is an assumption that their experience on Canadian waters plays into their smallmouth expertise. But in southwest Ontario where Johnston grew up, the lakes are diverse and mostly grass lakes. "Smallmouth didn't take off until I was in my teens," he says. "Early on, we were fishing for largemouth and flipping a jig in milfoil. It looks a lot like Florida, so my experience translates well with U.S. waters."

And while fishing and hunting were Chris' passion, his childhood dream was to play professional hockey. In fact, he had an offer from the semi-pro Knoxville Ice Bears in the Southern Professional Hockey League.

"I went down for a tryout, and they offered me a position on the team for $500 a week," recalls Johnston. "It was tempting, and I wish I would have done it for a year or two, but I decided to go back home where I could hunt and fish and work at the family's Canadian business [Peterborough Battery Sales and Service]."

It was shortly thereafter he started to dabble in U.S. pro bass events, had success and got serious about moving up into the Bassmaster events.

Ironically, the first bass he weighed in at a Bassmaster Classic was in the same arena where he tried out for the Ice Bears.

Fellow Canadian and Bassmaster Elite emcee Dave Mercer says he's not surprised that at least one of the Johnstons won AOY so quickly.

Canadian Supremacy

His life might have been very different if he'd pursued an opportunity to play pro hockey. But instead, he became one of the most versatile anglers in the world. Photo: Shane Durrance

As much as any two anglers on the Elite Series, brothers Chris and Cory Johnston work together. While still competitive with one another, they share information, strategies and even a bank account for expenses. Photo: Seigo Saito

"They are two of the best-rounded anglers I've ever witnessed," says Mercer, who competed against their dad when they were youngsters. "There's been only one AOY race [since 2021] when at least one or both of them haven't been in the Top 10 of the final AOY standings. And I suspect that there are more AOY titles in their futures."

They may have learned to fish for largemouth on grass lakes, but the Johnstons are pretty darn good on smallmouth waters, especially the St. Lawrence River. Aside from when Cory finished 36th at an Elite event there in 2019, neither he nor Chris have finished lower than sixth in any Elite competition on the New York fishery.

"Chris is one of the best smallmouth anglers I've ever seen and is the best I've ever had in my boat," says Mark Zona, former Bassmaster LIVE host and host of *Zona's Awesome Fishing Show*.

The 2024 season finale held at the St. Lawrence was a prime example of their dominance on those waters. That's where Chris wrapped up the Angler of the Year title to finish fourth in the tournament, and Cory won the event.

"I really can't explain it," says Chris. "It's not like we fish there all the time. We fish smallmouth lakes around Canada that are similar to it and have had success on those. It just seems to click with us."

Chris admits pressure got to him in his run-up to catch AOY leader Justin Hamner in the final tournament at the St. Lawrence. Hamner had a 13-point lead over Chris heading into the tourney.

After the first day, Chris was tied for 15th place, and he fell to 31st after Day 2.

He admits to becoming uncharacteristically rattled at the St. Lawrence event.

"The pressure of people expecting me to catch 26 pounds and the pressure of the AOY race got to me," he admits. "Also, I knew 70 spots on that water where I have caught them, so I was trying to do too much instead of settling down and keying on a couple areas."

Ultimately, it all worked out in the end.

However, an AOY title isn't based on one tourney. Chris says he put in the work to be consistent, and it paid off.

Prior to the opener, he spent time in Texas fishing nontournament lakes and practicing with forward-facing sonar.

"I laugh when people say I'm a 'Scoper," he says. "I knew I had to learn it better to compete; I did well for years without it but knew that was one weakness I had to work on."

The efforts paid off. He used the Garmin LiveScope to catch nearly every fish at Toledo Bend and Lake Fork on the sonar, jig-and-minnow technique. He finished seventh at Toledo Bend and 38th at Lake Fork.

"I've spent my entire career trying to be versatile," he insists. "I'd rather fish shallow with the flippin' rod, but if I have to go into 80 feet and ping a minnow, I will."

He had Top 30 finishes the rest of the season, except at Wheeler Lake (57th) where he says lost fish cost him.

Skills and experience aside, there is an X factor that helps make the Johnstons so good.

"They are able to work as a team, whether it's fishing near each other or if they back off each other," says Zona. "I made the comment on TV that, given that they work as a team, it would be hard for one of them to win AOY because they would cannibalize each other. I was wrong; they make it work."

It's been that way for the Johnstons from the beginning. They don't just share fishing information; they are a business corporation.

"It all stems back to when we fished team tournaments and were able to drive," explains Chris. "We formed a corporation, put all of our winnings in one account and took entry fees and expenses out of it. It's worked ever since."

He added that sponsorship money goes into the account, and they draw a salary at the end of the year and the rest remains for the next year's expenses.

"I've warned Cory to not do something stupid and lose a big sponsor," Chris jokes. "Will this work forever for us? Who knows? But it's working now."

Other pro anglers have roomed together and shared fishing information. Sometimes it works; oftentimes, it doesn't.

"We bounce ideas off each other and try to fish different sections of a lake," says Chris. "If he catches some on a buzzbait in his section, he'll tell me it's something I need to try in my section."

Transparency, he adds, is critical, whereas some people work together but won't share all of the info the way the Johnstons do.

"We try not to fish near each other and he's not going to lie to me and send me down a goat path," Chris insists. "We grew up fishing [team tournaments] side by side, so we fish the same way and have the same strengths. Working together like this helps us break down a lake faster."

That brotherly and business bond is tight, but don't think for a minute they aren't competing with each other.

"They are ultra-competitive with each other and that pushes both of them to excel," says Zona. "There are definitely more titles in their futures."

How long that future lasts remains to be seen, but Chris says he can assure you he won't be doing it as long as Rick Clunn.

"I'm away from home 120 days a year and that's hard when you have a family and miss out on the kids' sports events," he says. "It's nice being done with the season in August so I can hang out with the family until February."

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Inside The Mind of Trey McKinney

By CRAIG LAMB
SENIOR EDITOR

As a fearless teenager, the Illinois rookie seemed wise beyond his years in 2024 — and it seems safe to assume that his best years are still ahead of him

Photo: Andy Crawford (sunglasses); Seigo Saito (main)

TREY MCKINNEY'S BIGGEST regret, next to losing the title itself, was his plan for spending the $100,000 check that comes with winning Progressive Insurance Bassmaster Angler of the Year, which goes to the Bassmaster Elite Series pro accruing the most performance points during the season.

"We don't have a funded retirement plan, so I was going to purchase an investment property," McKinney said.

That thought came from a 19-year-old whose mindset should be anywhere but long-term financial planning. Meet the lesser-known side of this prodigy who set the 2024 Elite Series on fire.

Photo: Shane Durrance

Trey McKinney has a long list of triumphs, including an Elite win, the ROY trophy and hundreds of thousands of dollars in winnings. Photo: Seigo Saito

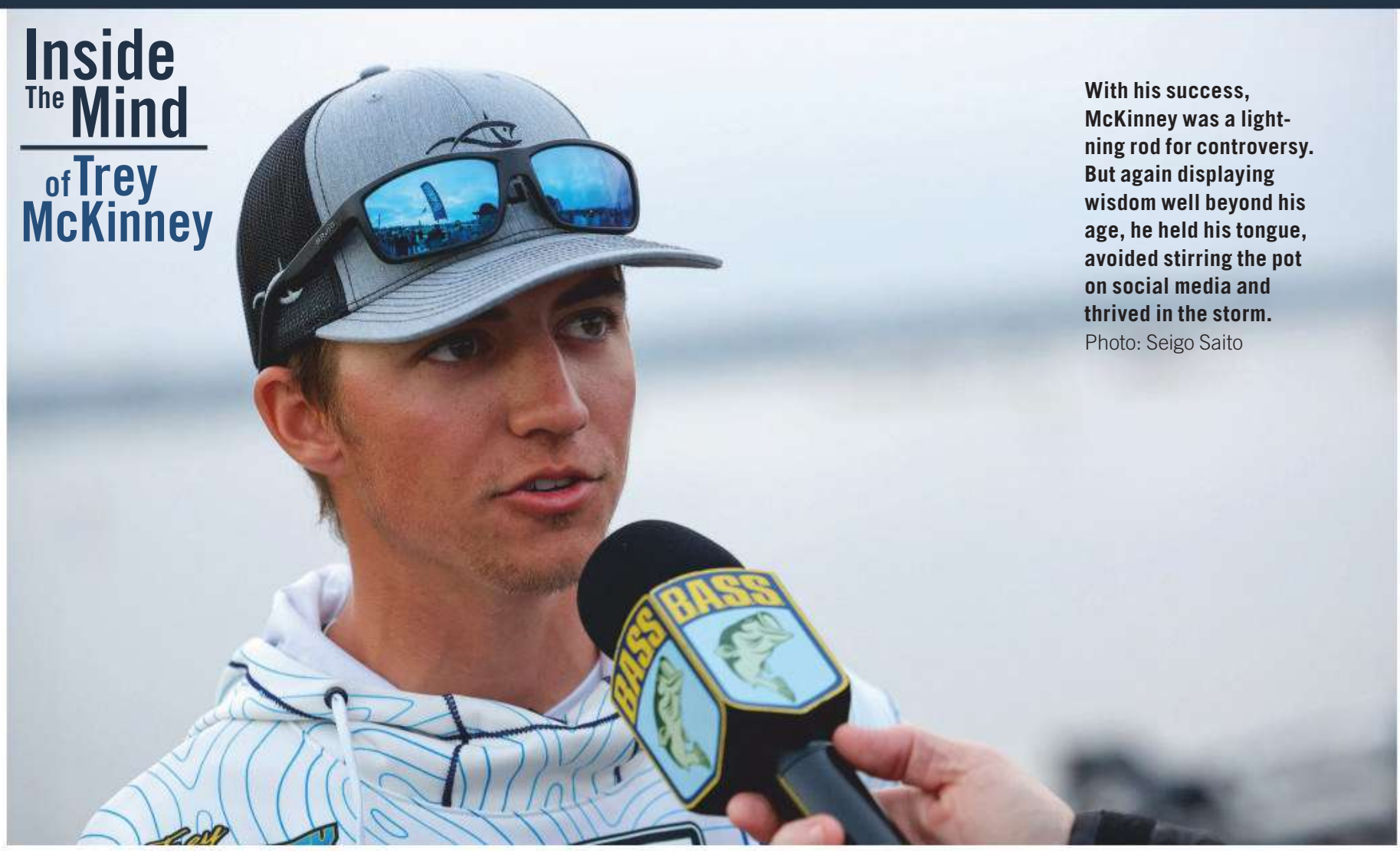
McKinney made history as the youngest angler to qualify for the Elite Series, took second in Angler of the Year and won Dakota Lithium Bassmaster Rookie of the Year. He capped a remarkable rookie season with a win in his second-ever Elite tournament.

Naysayers claimed the zealous teenager cut corners without having been around long enough to pay his dues. Angler protests led to polygraph tests that dispelled allegations of cheating. McKinney kept his cool during the resulting groundswell of negativity on social media, never adding to the unfounded drama.

As a homeschooled high school senior, McKinney qualified for the Elites through the Bassmaster Opens. He twice finished second and landed in the Top 20 in six out of nine tournaments. Even before then, McKinney had already won a slew of regional tournaments and point titles.

McKinney was interviewed by *Bassmaster* at his southern Illinois home prior to a sophomore Elite season that begins in February, the month of his 20th birthday.

Inside The Mind of Trey McKinney



With his success, McKinney was a lightning rod for controversy. But again displaying wisdom well beyond his age, he held his tongue, avoided stirring the pot on social media and thrived in the storm.
Photo: Seigo Saito

You are the third generation of a family lineage of elite barrel racers that includes your grandfather, parents and sister. What happened?

I could see horses becoming more of a routine than what I wanted, which was finding my passion in a challenging career that I could look forward to every day. I found myself gravitating to the pond more and more. Then it hit me when I fished my first tournament. That would be my career.

Did you get pushback from your family?

Absolutely not. My parents raised me and my sister to find a passion, even if outside of the horse industry, and follow it. Be the best at whatever that might be, and [they] support us along the way. My mom even paddled me around the pond so I could go fishing.

But then you missed out on the high school and college team experience.

I was already fishing regionals at 16, and two years later I was in the Opens. I just felt like it was an unnecessary step that would take me away from making money, setting me back from qualifying for the Elites. Did I miss out on the overall experience? Of course. But I also had something already going with fishing.

Then you took the big leap into the Opens.

It was intimidating, and I hope to never do that again. There are 200 boaters wanting to do the same thing as you, so it gets overly tense. That makes you prone to making quick decisions that can wreck the season with one bad tournament. My expectations for the Opens were to learn how to fish outside my comfort zone of regional events and gain more knowledge of fish behavior.

How was the transition from Opens to Elites?

It was nothing like I expected. In the Opens, I learned about fishing. In the Elites, I learned more about life.

How so?

After the Opens, my life changed — more and sooner than I expected because of winning the second Elite I ever fished. It hit me that I'm the rookie, the kid in their eyes. Hadn't paid my dues. I was a nervous wreck fishing against my heroes. In the Opens, there isn't any drama; no one is trying to tear you apart, get into your head. There is more off-water politics, business dealings and personal drama in the Elites than I expected.

Relive the moment when you hoisted the blue trophy at that second event.

When I touched it for the first time, it hit me. You've got to be old enough, mature enough, to stand on that stage and truly appreciate how much hard work it takes to finally win. So, it was more like an honor putting myself in their place.

You were in contention to win Angler of the Year at Smith Lake. That was until your day's catch was disqualified after violating the outside-help rule by answering a phone call from a family member about being late. What went through your mind?

Initially, I was going to lose the weight (and points) anyway after miscalculating my check-in time by an hour. Either way, I was torn up. It was the one thing that I could control and did not. It definitely took a toll on me to watch it go in just minutes. I was in a dark place for a few days.

Another life lesson learned?

Definitely. Little mistakes cost me last year, but they were made into a big deal. Lesson learned is pay attention to the small details. A mistake is a mistake. I was an hour late at Smith Lake. Got penalized for not reading the fine print about a no-wake-zone rule at St. Johns. Is it because I'm not as mature and wise as I should be? Absolutely. It's part of growing up. I realize I'm the kid surrounded by more experienced adults. There is a difference in being careless, which I am not, and making honest mistakes.

Then you bounced back at the final event in New York with the third-place finish.

Smallmouth were my nemesis. I could never find or catch them. Then I had that lightbulb moment that gave me the confidence I needed. I fish so much better when I gain confidence in a bait, tactic, whatever. It was the one event of the year that stood out more than anything else. It put some of the fun back in fishing.

You finished second in Angler of the Year and won the rookie title. Neither can be achieved just by luck. What made the difference last year?

Not having the option to rely on previous history or knowledge of anywhere we fished like the older guys. I was forced to learn about fish behavior at every stop, learn new water from scratch. I don't like to plan an outcome because it can go wrong. I like to fish free and open-minded. I had to rely on gut feelings from just spending so much time on the water just fishing, just learning.

Without the intellectual knowledge of the lakes, was it more intuitive thinking?

Yes. When you have a knowledge gap on a body of water, it helps so much to go feel it out. Look for what feels right and, again, that comes from spending over 300 days on the water during the year. The more you fish, the more you get that gut feeling that allows you to find fish, backtrack and build on it. No amount of research can replace time spent on the water.

Now you have a history and more knowledge. How will you approach that strategy this year?

You have to strike a balance between fishing history and learning from scratch. It's a deadly weapon, and I realize I don't yet fully know how to make that work.

Are you worried about the drama from last year carrying over to this season?

I don't know, and it doesn't matter. I'm not going to let my dream get crushed by someone else's opinion. Last year, I kept my cool, kept my mouth shut and avoided feeding the drama. It wasn't easy because the negativity never let up. Honestly, every time I hear negativity, it makes me want to turn it into a positive and win that much more. All I know to do is hopefully gain respect by consistently catching fish.

You wanted to invest the $100,000 Angler of the Year winnings for retirement. Don't you think that's a premature goal for your age?

Not at all. Being self-employed, we don't have a 401(k) contribution plan. I don't want to end my career and be like, now what? Do I have to get a day job?

So, financial planning is a realistic goal?

Yes. I've invested most of my winnings. I'm proud to say that I also financially support myself. I have great sponsors who are also friends. I'm a believer that relationships come first, then business.

What are your goals for the 2025 Elite season?

My personal goal is maintaining the momentum and consistency from last year. I know that will be a challenge because of the level of competition. I don't want to get stuck in a rut. I want to keep expanding on my gut instinct so I don't have to rely on fishing history. Coming into last year, I set just catching fish as a priority, and now I realize paying attention to the details is equally as important.

McKinney's true coming-out party was his first Elite win at Lake Fork in Texas. He topped the field with more than 130 pounds in four days. Photo: Chase Sansom

McKinney says he doesn't know what to expect in 2025. But whatever happens, he plans on turning negativity into positivity once again. He also plans on paying more attention to the little things. Photo: Andy Crawford

Humminbird Debuts ALL-NEW MEGA Live 2 & XPLORE Series Fishfinders

By DAVID A. BROWN
Senior Writer

THE ONLY THING better than seeing your underwater targets is seeing them with greater clarity, definition and distance — precisely what Humminbird delivered with the new MEGA Live 2. A significant advancement in live-sonar technology, this latest achievement fuels efficiency by helping anglers dial in their targets quicker than ever.

Time maximization is the cornerstone of competitive success, and no one knows this better than Humminbird pro Davy Hite. The 1999 Bassmaster Classic champion and a two-time Bassmaster Angler of the Year (1997, 2002), Hite knows what it takes to excel on the water, so when he describes a new product as “incredible,” his words resonate.

“I can literally see a brushpile 150 feet away, and even though you can’t cast that far with most lures, when I can identify that target that far away, I can prepare to make that cast at a long distance,” Hite said. “If you’re just seeing your target when it’s 60 to 70 feet away while you’re on the trolling motor and you have to stop the boat and make that cast, you’ll often get closer than you want to be.

“If I can see that target before I get too close, I’ll have my boat in position to make that cast.”

Hite also notes how the new MEGA Live 2 affords him more time to tailor each retrieve to specific scenarios. Ultra-clear real-time images make tracking lure position and fish response downright surgical.

“I can throw a topwater 100 feet, see it hit the water while I’m watching my screen and know when I’m right over the target,” Hite said. “Oftentimes, I’m going to adjust my presentation, and you can do all those things from 100 feet away.”

Photo: Chase Sansom

Find 'Em Faster

Humminbird MEGA Live 2 provides enhanced clarity and bait tracking with improved target separation for monitoring fish response to lure presentations. Meanwhile, fish really show up well on MEGA Live 2, even around brush or cover, which helps anglers be more efficient on the water. Hite stresses the time-management benefit.

"With MEGA Live 2, I can identify a fish in a brushpile or around a piece of cover, where before, they would blend together," Hite said. "This makes me more efficient on the water, because I don't overlook opportunities, but I'm also not wasting time on unproductive spots."

With Forward, Down and Landscape modes providing customized viewing around the boat, MEGA Live 2 offers 15 fishing-themed palettes for optimal visibility in any conditions. TargetBoost Technology enhances this by making fish and bait stand out even in dense vegetation or brush, further improving clarity in all environments. Additionally, Humminbird's redesigned transducer mount provides increased stability, 7.5-degree adjustments and new locking positions.

Compatible with the new Humminbird XPLORE units, the APEX units and SOLIX G3 models, a MEGA Live 2 transducer works with Minn Kota Ultrex trolling motors, the TargetLock accessory and various hand-control or transom-mount setups.

XPLORE Like Never Before

Compatible with MEGA Live Imaging, MEGA 360 Imaging and MEGA Side & Down Imaging, Humminbird XPLORE units sync with Minn Kota motors, shallow-water anchors and the One-Boat Network (OBN) for total boat control. Offered in 9-, 10- and 12-inch displays that allow the user to personalize the interface and OBN buttons, XPLORE units include Cross Touch interface with touchscreen capabilities and tactile knobs.

"When I turn on my Humminbird XPLORE unit, the first thing I notice is just how clear the HD screen is," Hite said. "You immediately notice what a bright, clear picture it creates. The other thing that jumps out at you is how Humminbird has eliminated a lot of the glare you get on sunny days."

Among the user-friendly features, Advanced Waypoint Management allows for customizable icons and color-coded waypoints. For easy backup, the XPLORE can sync up to 10,000 waypoints to a smartphone.

Humminbird XPLORE units come with an SD card pre-loaded with LakeMaster and CoastMaster maps, which deliver high-definition mapping for more than 13,000 lakes, major U.S. coastal waters covering 170 million acres of water. For precision searches, these maps show 1-foot contour increment.

Maximizing the value of this mapping detail, the XPLORE's quad-core processor ensures not only a fast start-up, but also timely reset and update capabilities. Hite said this speed will revolutionize search efforts.

"Running down the lake using LakeMaster, I can stay zoomed in and the screen stays with you instead of updating when you're a quarter mile down the lake," Hite said.

"The XPLORE unit can move through that map system much better, so you can cover water at 30 to 40 mph and still be able to look at those contours.

"Time efficiency is so important to tournament fishing, so being able to look at those contour lines and stay dialed in on what you're looking for makes you so much more efficient on the water."

Winning Ways: The Path To 2024 Elite Victory

By LOUIE STOUT
SENIOR WRITER

From old-school tactics to cutting-edge techniques, the best anglers in the world highlighted the lures and patterns that will catch fish right now

Photos: Kyle Jessie (Fujita, Walters); Chase Sansom (McKinney); Seigo Saito (Garrett, Ito); Tommy Sendek (Johnston - St. Johns); Dalton Tumblin (Johnston - St. Lawrence, Loughran, Prince)

Feb. 22-25, Gamakatsu Bassmaster Elite at Toledo Bend

Japanese angler Kyoya Fujita captured his second Elite Series victory and won a century belt with a total weight of 100 pounds, 13 ounces.

While many anticipated the bass to be moving shallow to spawn, Fujita fished offshore for staging prespawners.

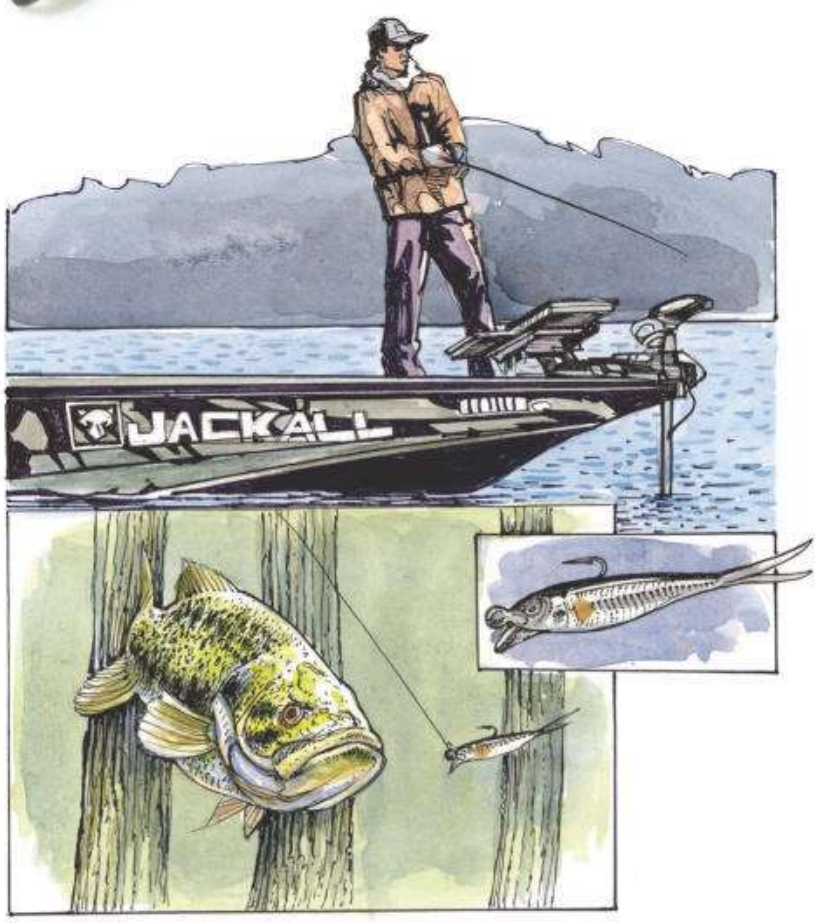
The winner tossed minnow jigs at bass suspended in timber that he saw on his forward-facing sonar (FFS). Early in the tournament he was fishing timber in 30 feet of water, but he moved to another creek later where he caught bass in 10 feet of water. When he saw bass on the screen, he would cast to a fish and lightly shake the lure in the fish's face to get it to bite.

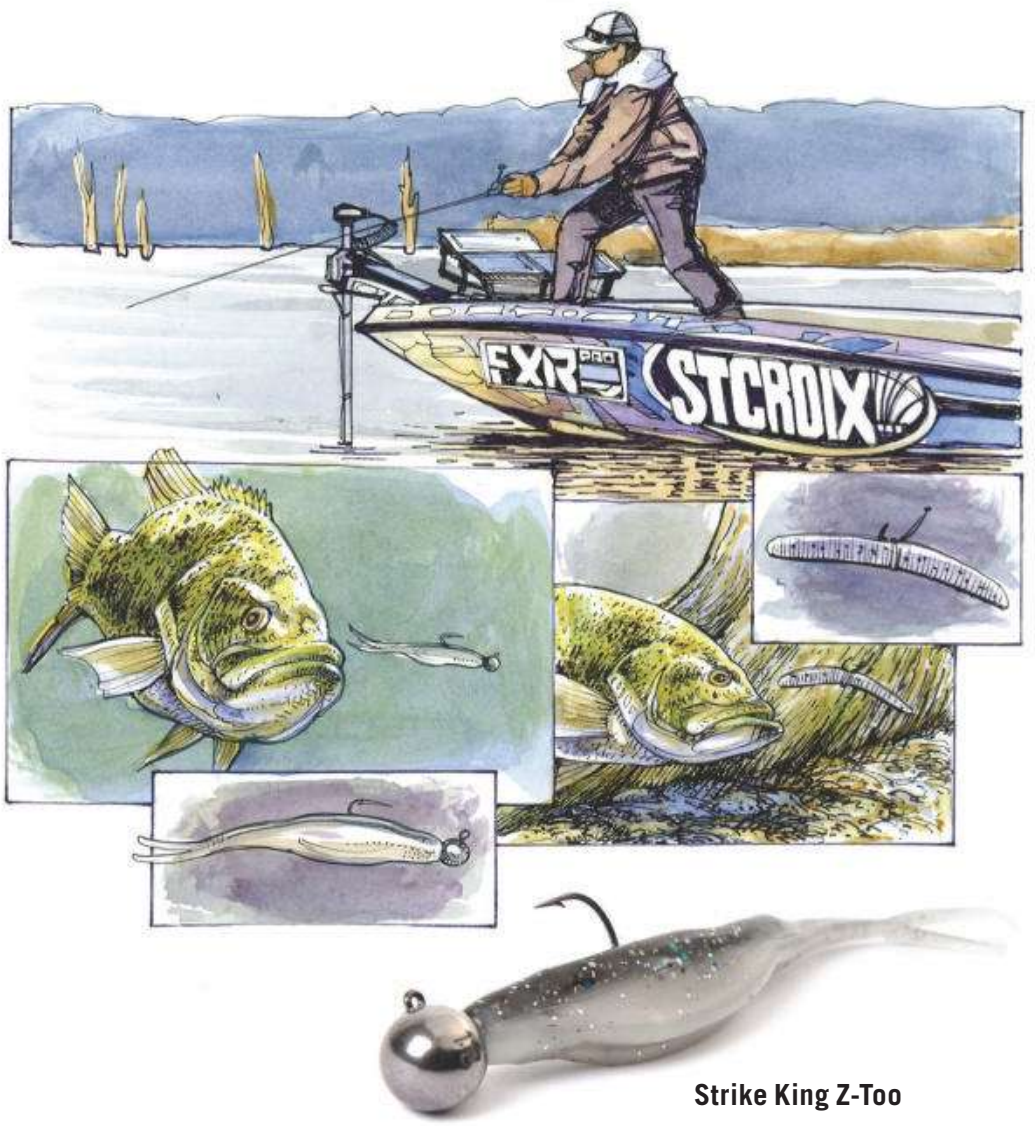
Key baits: Jackall Driftfry and Deps Sakamata Shad (minnow colors) fished on a 1/8- or 3/16-ounce Keitech Tungsten Super Round Jig Head

Conditions: The area experienced warming weather and a full moon during the weekend competition days, yet top finishers weren't fishing for spawners.

Other key patterns: Patrick Walters finished second by staying on the trolling motor, following a creek channel and monitoring his FFS screen. When he saw fish, he fished a 3/16-ounce Damiki rig with a Zoom Super Fluke or a Neko-rigged Zoom Magnum Swamp Crawler. Third-place finisher Pat Schlapper fished the deep edge of a grass flat with a Queen Tackle tungsten jighead with a minnow-style bait.

Jackall Driftfry





Strike King Z-Too

Illustrations: Doug Schermer

Feb. 29-March 3, AFTCO Bassmaster Elite at Lake Fork

Rookie Trey McKinney wasted no time winning his first Bassmaster Elite trophy, and he did it in style. His 130-pound, 15-ounce final total was the fourth-heaviest weight produced in a four-day B.A.S.S. event in history, and he also became the youngest angler ever to win an Elite event.

The 19-year-old credits adjustments he made to the changing conditions as the key to his victory. He keyed on pockets, and when the weather changed, he adjusted his tactics.

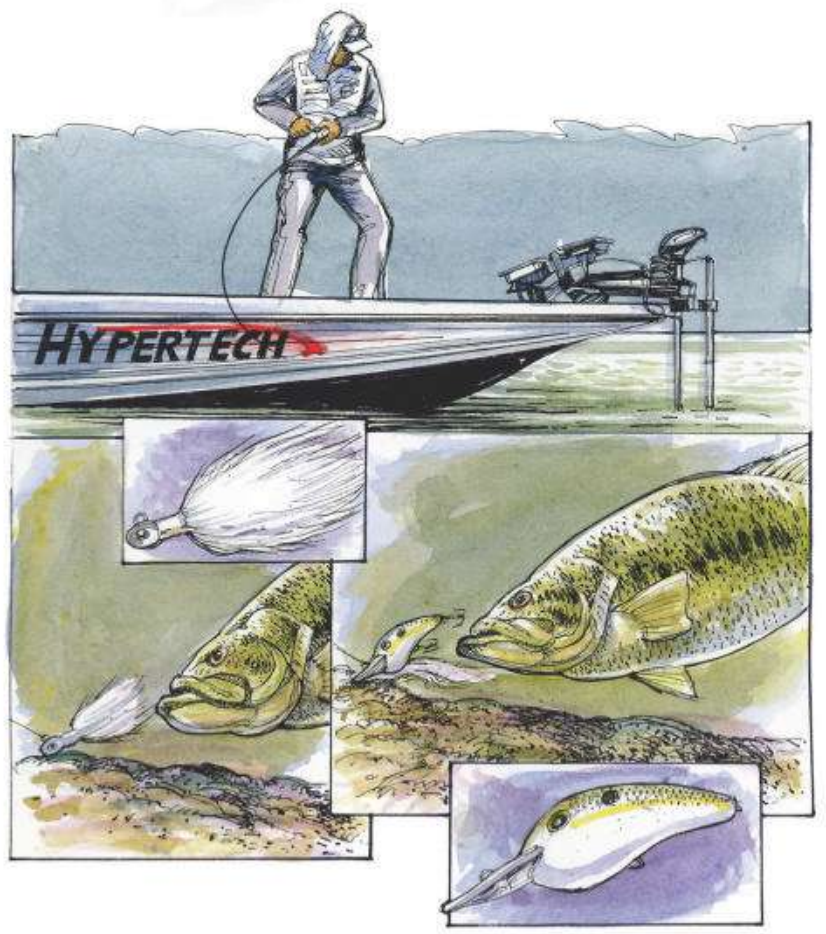
Key baits: Strike King Z-Too on a 1/8-ounce jighead and a Neko-rigged Strike King Ocho with a 1/32-ounce Strike King Tungsten Nail Weight and a 1/0 Gamakatsu Stinger hook

Conditions: Temperatures were in the mid-80s during practice, but a cold front moved in, dropping temps into the low 40s, followed by bluebird skies and a 15 mph wind.

Other key patterns: Second-place Tyler Rivet keyed on staging areas going into spawning pockets with a Bill Lewis Scope Stik 120 and a Big Bite Baits Swimming Craw on a 3/8-ounce jig. Justin Hamner fished a Yo-Zuri 3DB Jerkbait and a wacky-rigged Netbait ION while LiveScoping fish around timber and stumps to finish third.

Winning Ways: The Path To 2024 Elite Victory

Strike King 5XD



April 12-15, Lowrance Bassmaster Elite at Harris Chain

Rookie John Garrett camped on a shellbar in 12 feet of water and made it work, capturing his first Elite Series victory with a total of 84 pounds, 5 ounces.

Garrett, claiming he had no other reliable pattern, said the shellbar was where bass moved up to feed on tilapia. He would begin each day by fishing a "limit spot," then go to the bar to cull out with bigger fish. The postspawn bass were larger, but the bites came slowly. On the last day, he caught a 7-4 that cemented his winning margin of 10-9.

After catching a few on crankbaits, he showed them a hair jig that allowed him to catch three good fish.

Key baits: Strike King 5XD (olive shad); Strike King 1.5 squarebill; Carolina-rigged Strike King Ocho (junebug) with 5/8-ounce weight and a 1/2-ounce hair jig (white)

Conditions: The first day of competition was postponed due to high winds. Subsequent days were sunny and warm.

Other key patterns: Second-place JT Thompkins fished brushpiles with a variety of baits, including an Outkast Tackle Cage Feider Jig with a Yamamoto Flappin' Hog trailer as well as a Neko-rigged Yamamoto Senko. KJ Queen fished a canal to finish third with a wacky-rigged Zoom Zlinky and a Queen Tackle Tungsten Switchblade bladed jig with a Zoom Ultra Vibe Speed Worm trailer.

April 18-21, MAXAM Tire Bassmaster Elite at St. Johns River

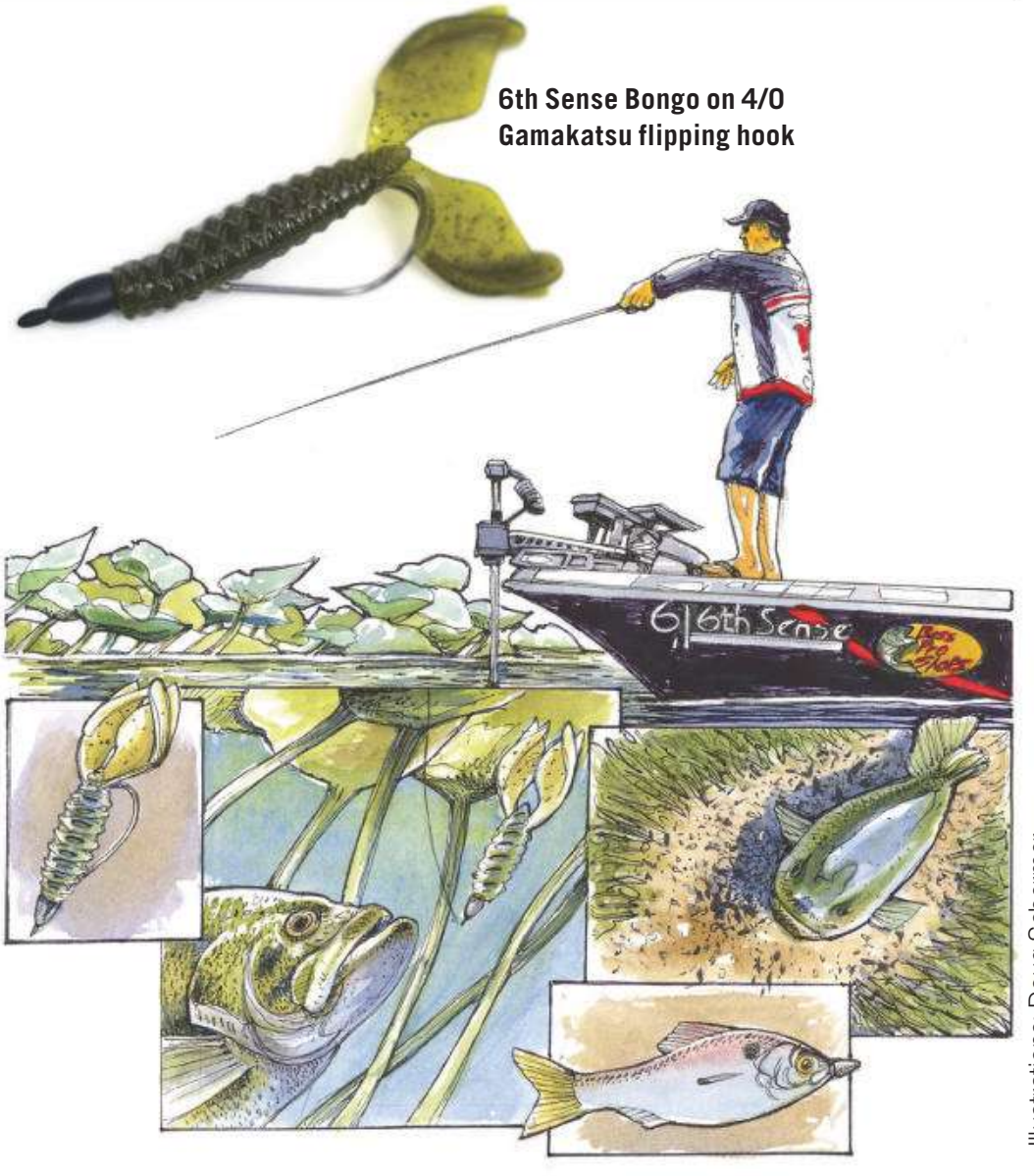
Spawning bass were the key to Cory Johnston's first-ever Elite Series win.

However, when the spawner bite diminished on the fourth day, he turned to flipping lily pads on the main-river section where he caught a 7-12 that helped lift him to victory with an impressive four-day total of 93-6. He used his Garmin Perspective Mode to catch bedding fish in a spawning bay and would Power-Pole down to work the fish from a distance.

Key baits: 6th Sense Bongo creature bait on a 4/0 Gamakatsu flipping hook and 1/4-ounce sinker; 6-inch drop-shot rigged finesse worm (green pumpkin); 5-inch stickworm with a 1/4-ounce sinker and a 4/0 Gamakatsu flipping hook; 6th Sense Panorama on a 6/0 Gamakatsu Extra Wide Gap Hook and a 5/16-ounce 6th Sense tungsten weight

Conditions: The weather was stable with a full moon approaching.

Other key patterns: Brad Whatley fished main-river spatterdock pad fields with an Epic Baits Tournament Grade Swimbait with a 4-inch Bass Assassin Woopah Craw trailer as well as a Bill Lewis Rat-L-Trap (chrome/blue) to finish second. Third-place Jacob Foutz fished for schooling bass with a Yo-Zuri 3DB Pencil and a Strike King Z-Too on a 3/16-ounce jighead.



6th Sense Bongo on 4/0 Gamakatsu flipping hook

Illustrations: Doug Schermer

May 10-13, Minn Kota Bassmaster Elite at Lake Murray

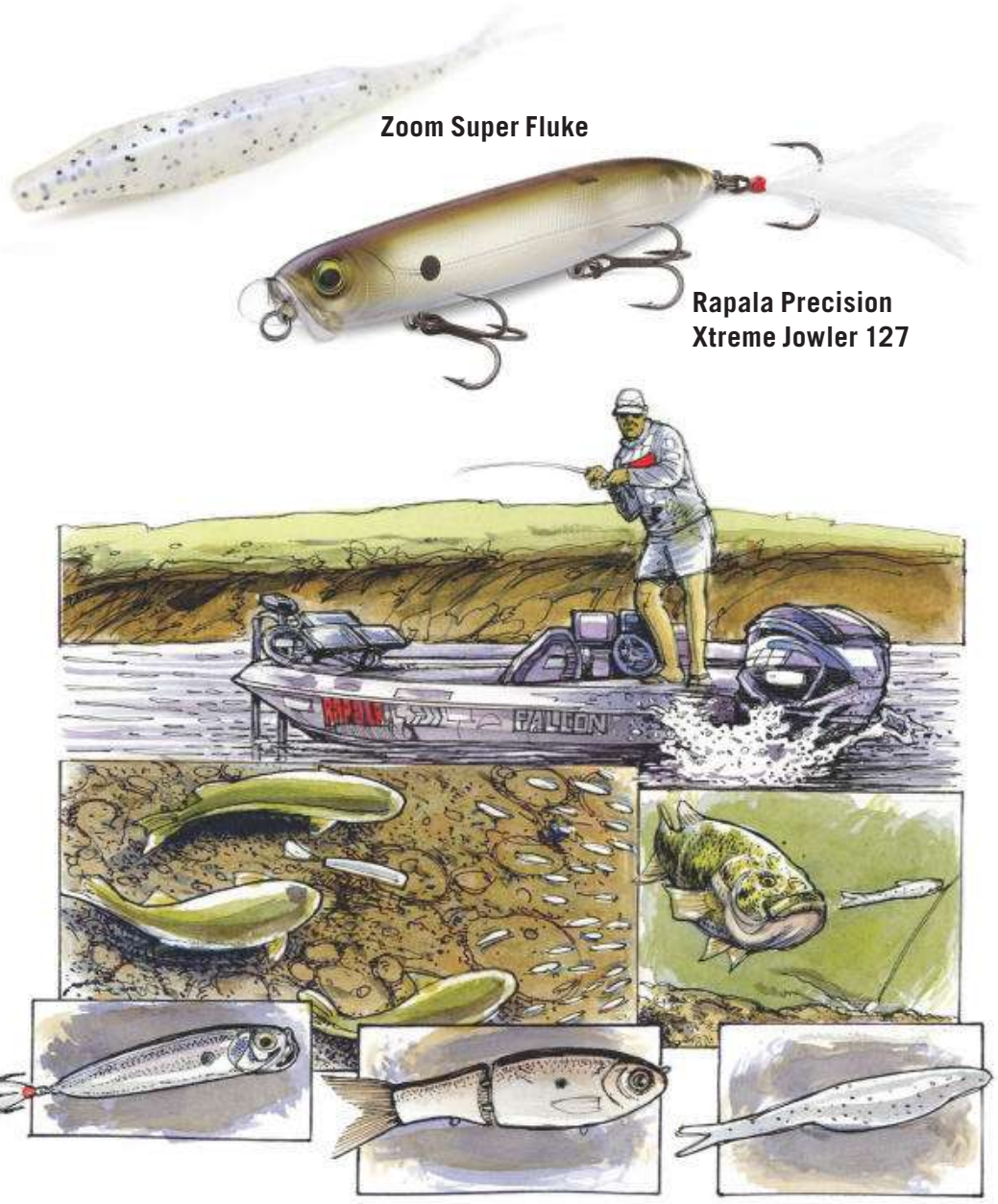
A flexible, ever-changing pattern was the key to Patrick Walters' win on the popular South Carolina lake.

Walters fished a shallow blueback herring spawn on points early each day, then moved to deeper edges of those points. He fished multiple points and said it was a timing thing. He caught fish on swimbaits and topwaters when they were schooling early, then switched to a Carolina rig when the bass moved deeper. He weighed in a total of 93 pounds, 15 ounces to seal the deal on his third Elite Series win.

Key baits: Zoom Super Fluke on a 1/0 VMC Neko hook; Rapala Precision Xtreme Jowler 127; Clutch Swimbait Co. Darter glidebait; Zoom Brush Hog Carolina-rigged on a 4/0 VMC EWG hook

Conditions: Sunny skies prevailed most of the tournament, although storms postponed Day 2. The herring were spawning early each morning.

Other key patterns: Cody Huff, who finished second and won the big-bass pot with a 7-6 on Day 4, fished wake baits, a jighead minnow rig and a Rapala OG Deep Tiny 7 flat-sided crankbait. Third-place JT Thompkins fished for bass around the herring spawn with topwaters, Yamamoto D-Shads and Yamamoto Senkos rigged with tail spinners.



Zoom Super Fluke

Rapala Precision Xtreme Jowler 127

Z-Man Evergreen ChatterBait JackHammer with Bass Assassin Lit'l Boss

June 13-16, Whataburger Bassmaster Elite at Wheeler Lake

Veteran Elite Series pro Cliff Prince got his first Elite win by camping on one area in the Decatur Flats of the Alabama fishery. His first clue to the spot was when he caught a bass there during practice and dropped a waypoint. On the last day of practice, he visited the spot and saw a local catching bass every cast.

He fished the area, which consisted of two small, hard spots within the grass, for four days, weighing in a total of 80 pounds, 15 ounces. He fished a ChatterBait but had to crawl it on the bottom with the blade barely turning.

Key baits: 1/2-ounce Z-Man Evergreen ChatterBait JackHammer with a 4-inch Bass Assassin Lit'l Boss swimbait (snow storm) as well as a 7.5-inch Bass Assassin Tapout worm rigged on a 3/16-ounce Greenfish Tackle Casey Ashley Clean Up Shakey Head

Conditions: Air temps were in the 90s and it was sunny all week.

Other key patterns: Ray Hanselman fished a shellbar with a 6th Sense Crush 50X squarebill and a 6th Sense Flock Hair Jig to finish second. John Cox caught his third-place fish in a backwater pond with a Berkley Swamp Lord Frog.

Winning Ways: The Path To 2024 Elite Victory

Nories Flip Gill

OSP Saikoro "Dice" Rubber Magnum bait

June 27-30, TNT Fireworks Bassmaster Elite at Smith Lake

Taku Ito proved why this Alabama lake is his favorite by winning there masterfully using Japanese lures and tactics.

He fished 25-foot-deep brushpiles in Rock Creek, where he found the "fatter" fish that were there feeding on crawfish and bluegill. He says deep brushpiles were key, and he had to adjust his presentation often since the fish were heavily pressured.

Ito weighed in 58 pounds to seal the deal on his second Elite win and topped off his final-day bag with a 5-pound, 12-ounce spotted bass that won the tournament's big-bass pot, as well.

Key baits: Neko-rigged 3.6-inch Nories Flip Gill with a 3/16-ounce weight; 14-millimeter OSP Saikoro "Dice" Rubber Magnum bait rigged drop-shot style with a 3/16-ounce weight; Nories Wrapping Minnow Spy Bait

Conditions: The anglers fished in triple-digit temperatures, although a storm did blow in on the final day.

Other key patterns: Rookie Robert Gee used his LiveScope all week to catch his second-place fish on deep brushpiles with a 4-inch Yamamoto Shad Shape Worm (natural shad and smoke) and a home-made hair jig. Jay Przekurat fished around a lot of bait in deep timber to finish third with a Strike King Baby Z-Too (gray glide and smokey shad).

Aug. 8-12, Tackle Warehouse Bassmaster Elite at Lake Champlain

Elite Series veteran Ed Loughran won his first Bassmaster Elite title by "staying out of the way."

Loughran knew he wouldn't make the 2025 Bass Pro Shops Bassmaster Classic presented by Under Armour cut due to some midseason medical issues that caused him to miss two events, so he tried fishing areas that kept him out of other anglers' waters.

Loughran fished a slow-tapering area covered with chunk rock mixed with grass in 4 to 10 feet. While he says he used his LiveScope to see boulders lying on the bottom in holes in the grass, he didn't use it to target individual fish. He caught a mixture of largemouth and smallmouth to weigh in a four-day total of 80 pounds, 12 ounces.

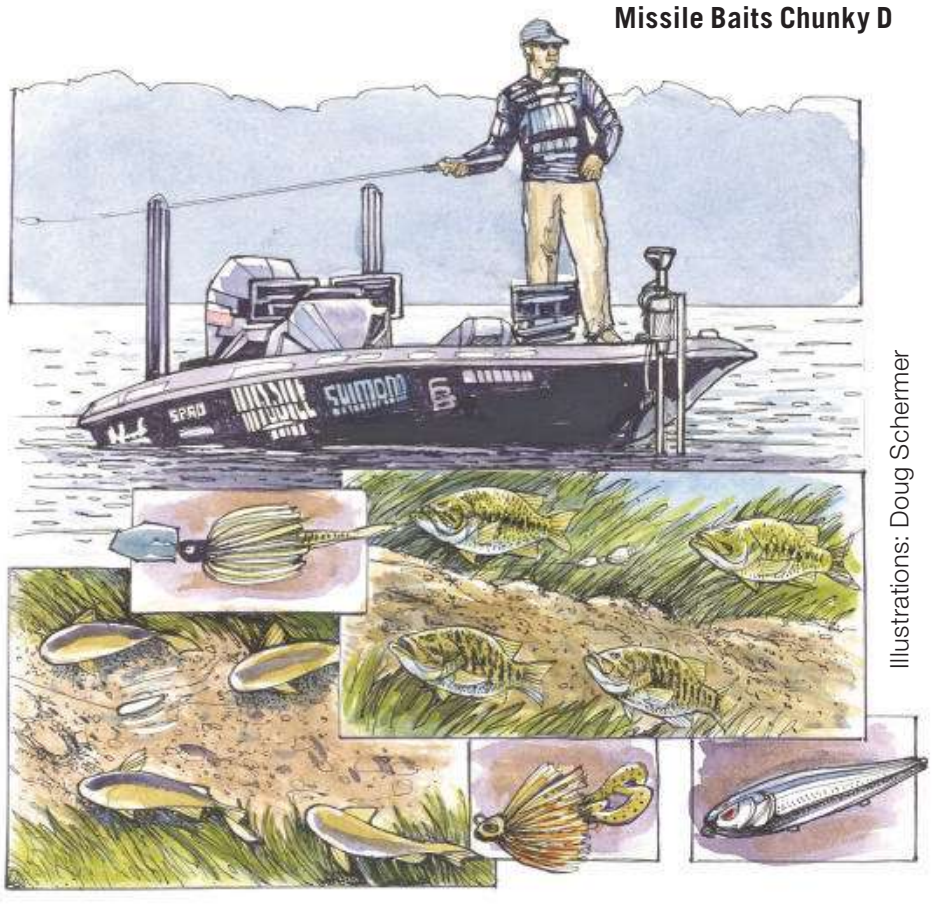
Key baits: 1/2-ounce Missile Baits Ike's Mini Flip Jig; 3/8-ounce homemade jig paired with a Missile Baits Craw Father trailer (green pumpkin); homemade jig with Missile Baits Chunky D (green pumpkin); 1/2-ounce Z-Man ChatterBait JackHammer (green pumpkin) with a 4.5-inch Missile Baits Spunk Shad (goby white); Spro Walking Haint (chrome)

Conditions: Bad weather and wind forced the postponement of Day 2, and the tournament was extended into Monday.

Other key patterns: Chris Johnston finished second by fishing deep breaks with a 4-inch minnow rigged on a 3/8- or 1/2-ounce Northland Tackle Smeltinator head, while third-place finisher Robert Gee keyed on ridges that dropped from 35 to 50 feet with a 5-inch Yamamoto Shad Shape Floater Worm on a 1/4-ounce jighead.

Spro Walking Haint

Homemade jig with Missile Baits Chunky D



Illustrations: Doug Schermer

Aug. 15-18, Humminbird Bassmaster Elite at St. Lawrence River

6th Sense
Party Minnow 3.0

Cory Johnston battled 8-foot waves on Lake Ontario to win his second Elite Series title of the season and his second century belt after weighing in a four-day total of 102 pounds.

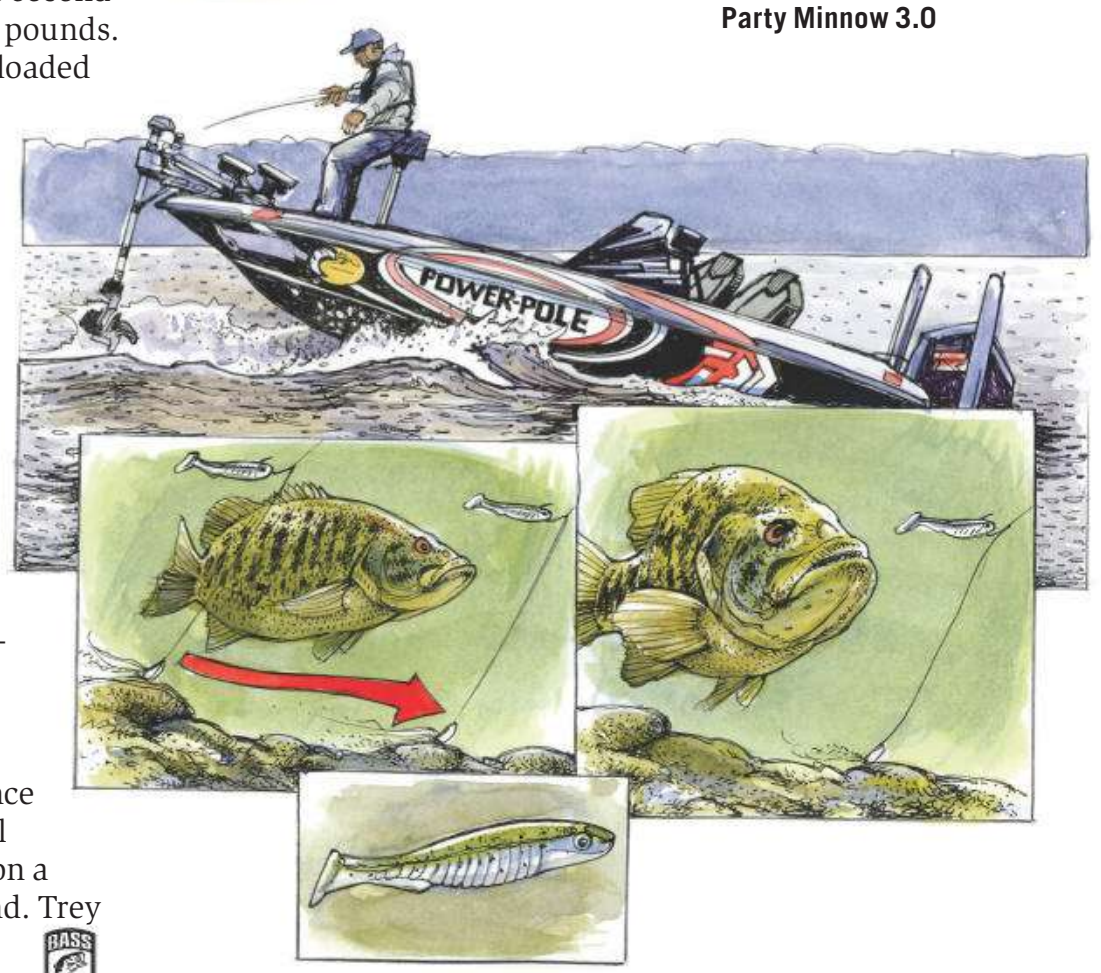
He keyed on an 80-yard stretch in 33 feet of water loaded with big smallmouth. He said he had to alter his drop-shot presentation to trigger bites the last two days. The first two days he had to let it sit; the last two days he had to drag it through the sweet spot.

Meanwhile, his younger brother Chris, who finished fourth, wrapped up the Progressive Insurance Bassmaster Angler of the Year title.

Key baits: 6th Sense Party Minnow 3.0 (electric shiner) with a No. 2 Gamakatsu A-Mart G-Finesse Drop Shot Hook and a 3/8-ounce 6th Sense tungsten weight

Conditions: The waters were calm the first two days, allowing anglers to make the long run to Lake Ontario, but the lake was rolling with big waves the last two days. Nearly all of the top finishers relied upon their forward-facing sonar to catch their fish.

Other key patterns: Robert Gee fished a drop on a hump near the mouth of the lake inside the St. Lawrence River between Carleton Island and the main channel with a 5-inch Yamamoto Shad Shape Floater Worm on a homemade jighead in 40 feet of water to finish second. Trey McKinney used a Strike King Z-Too on a 3/8-ounce tungsten jighead to grab third place.



Contingencies

Toyota Bonus Bucks presented $3,000 to the highest-placing eligible entrant. The second-highest placing eligible angler received $2,000.

Gamakatsu Bassmaster Elite at Toledo Bend: **Luke Palmer**

AFTCO Bassmaster Elite at Lake Fork: **Trey McKinney**

Lowrance Bassmaster Elite at Harris Chain: **Trey McKinney**

MAXAM Tire Bassmaster Elite at St. Johns River: **Drew Benton**

Minn Kota Bassmaster Elite at Lake Murray: **Cody Huff**

Whataburger Bassmaster Elite at Wheeler Lake: **Cliff Prince**

TNT Fireworks Bassmaster Elite at Smith Lake: **Taku Ito**

Tackle Warehouse Bassmaster Elite at Lake Champlain: **Will Davis Jr.**

Humminbird Bassmaster Elite at St. Lawrence River: **Trey McKinney**

The Phoenix Boats Big Bass Award of $1,000 was presented to the angler who weighed in the biggest bass each day as well as $2,000 for the overall biggest bass of the event.

Gamakatsu Bassmaster Elite at Toledo Bend: **Bryan New**

AFTCO Bassmaster Elite at Lake Fork: **Justin Hamner**

Lowrance Bassmaster Elite at Harris Chain: **Jacob Powroznik**

MAXAM Tire Bassmaster Elite at St. Johns River: **Brad Whatley**

Minn Kota Bassmaster Elite at Lake Murray: **Cody Huff**

Whataburger Bassmaster Elite at Wheeler Lake: **Greg Hackney & Cliff Prince (tie)**

TNT Fireworks Bassmaster Elite at Smith Lake: **Taku Ito**

Tackle Warehouse Bassmaster Elite at Lake Champlain: **Kyle Patrick**

Humminbird Bassmaster Elite at St. Lawrence River: **Joey Cifuentes**

The Rapala CrushCity Monster Bag prize paid $2,000 to the angler with the heaviest single-day bag.

Gamakatsu Bassmaster Elite at Toledo Bend: **Kyoya Fujita**

AFTCO Bassmaster Elite at Lake Fork: **Taku Ito**

Lowrance Bassmaster Elite at Harris Chain: **John Garrett**

MAXAM Tire Bassmaster Elite at St. Johns River: **Brad Whatley**

Minn Kota Bassmaster Elite at Lake Murray: **Patrick Walters**

Whataburger Bassmaster Elite at Wheeler Lake: **Cliff Prince**

TNT Fireworks Bassmaster Elite at Smith Lake: **Taku Ito**

Tackle Warehouse Bassmaster Elite at Lake Champlain: **Seth Feider**

Humminbird Bassmaster Elite at St. Lawrence River: **Chris Johnston**

Yamaha Power Pay presented $2,500 to the highest-placing eligible entrant and $1,500 to the second-highest-placing eligible entrant. Eligible event winners received $4,000.

Gamakatsu Bassmaster Elite at Toledo Bend: **Kyoya Fujita**

AFTCO Bassmaster Elite at Lake Fork: **Trey McKinney**

Lowrance Bassmaster Elite at Harris Chain: **John Garrett**

MAXAM Tire Bassmaster Elite at St. Johns River: **Drew Benton**

Minn Kota Bassmaster Elite at Lake Murray: **Patrick Walters**

Whataburger Bassmaster Elite at Wheeler Lake: **Ray Hanselman**

TNT Fireworks Bassmaster Elite at Smith Lake: **Taku Ito**

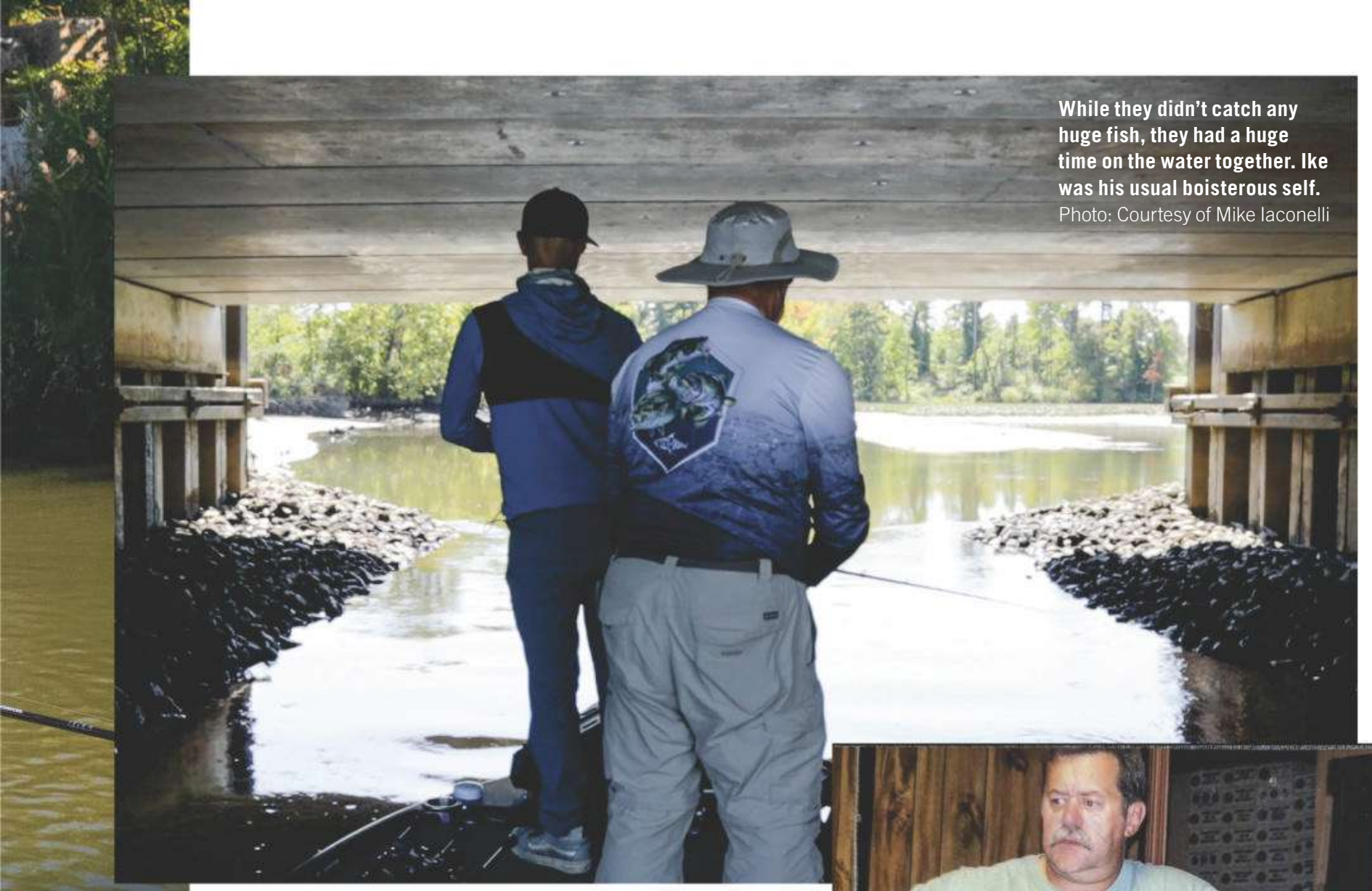
Tackle Warehouse Bassmaster Elite at Lake Champlain: **Robert Gee**

Humminbird Bassmaster Elite at St. Lawrence River: **Robert Gee**

Cancer survivor Gerald Gibson, a life member of B.A.S.S., had a therapeutic fishing trip with Mike Iaconelli. Photo: Courtesy of Mike Iaconelli

Philadelphia Dreaming

By JOE CERMELE



While they didn't catch any huge fish, they had a huge time on the water together. Ike was his usual boisterous self.
Photo: Courtesy of Mike Iaconelli

In the face of hard times, a "never give up" booster shot from Mike Iaconelli can be just what the doctor ordered

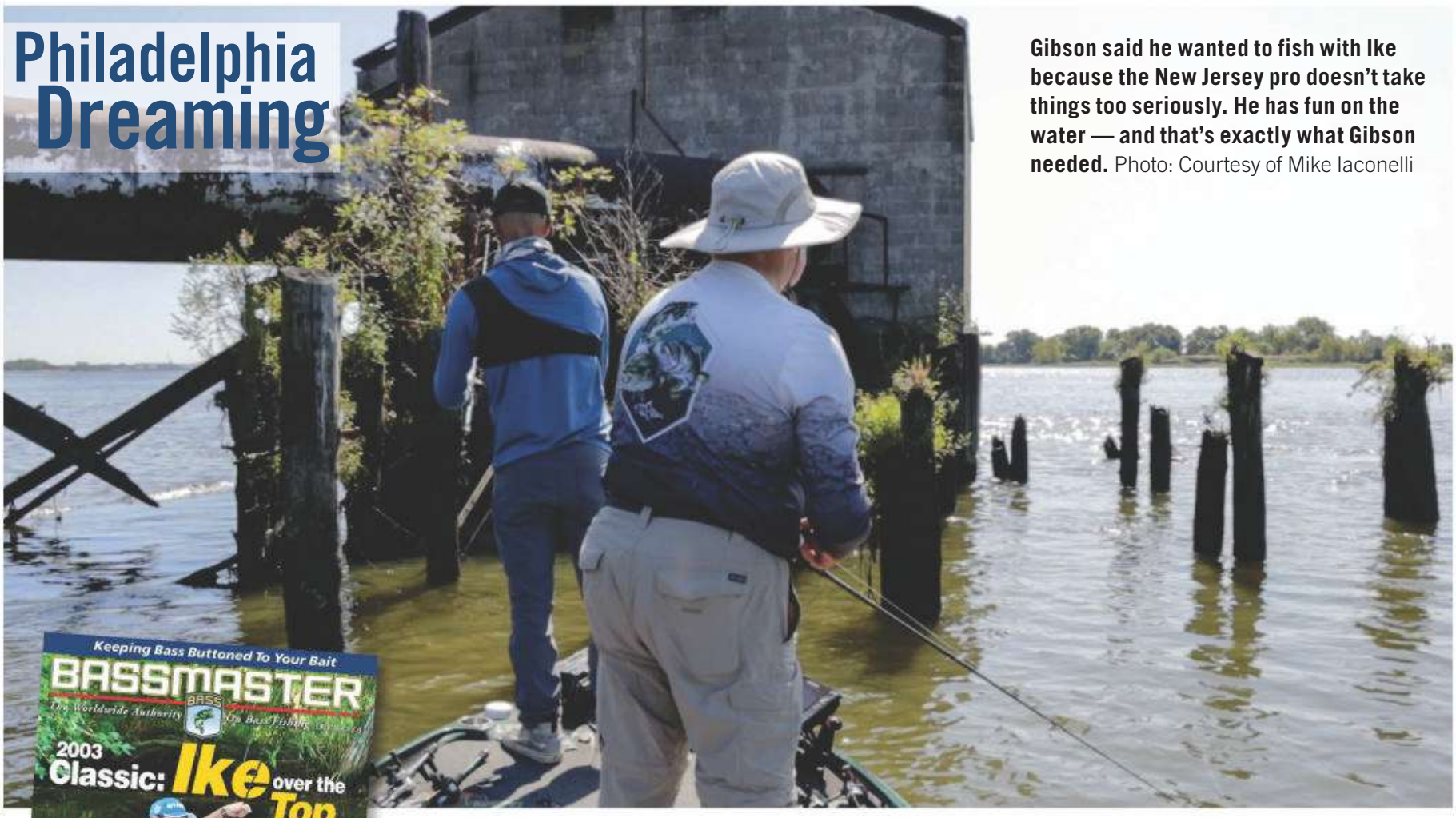
Gibson lost his wife Sandra one year before his fishing trip with Ike.
Photo: Courtesy of Gerald Gibson

NEVER GIVE UP. They're three little words with so much power. Most people would tell you they live by them, but our follow-through on the mantra tends to be dictated by the gravity of the situation. Not giving up on catching a 10-pound bass is one thing, because even if it never happens, life goes on. Not giving up when a doctor presents you with a diagnosis of terminal cancer is another. Some people have that kind of fight in them; many do not. When Gerald Gibson, a 66-year-old former steel buyer from Nassau, N.Y., was told he had multiple myeloma — a type of blood cancer — in March 2022, it wasn't what the doctor said to him that got him in the ring and swinging.

"It hit me very hard," a tearful Gibson recalled. "But the real driving force behind my willingness to fight was when the doctor looked at my wife and told her she better start getting prepared for me to not be here anymore. I couldn't accept that."

Illustration: Breanne Jackson

Philadelphia Dreaming



Gibson said he wanted to fish with Ike because the New Jersey pro doesn't take things too seriously. He has fun on the water — and that's exactly what Gibson needed. Photo: Courtesy of Mike Iaconelli

Keeping Bass Buttoned To Your Bait
BASSMASTER
2003
Classic: Ike over the Top
How Pros Modify Crankbaits
Does Your Lake Sport Wood? Here's Which Trees Hold Bass

Gibson couldn't resist asking Ike to autograph a 2003 copy of *Bassmaster* Magazine with Ike on the cover. Photo: B.A.S.S. Archives

Gibson did not leave Sandra, his wife of 43 years. When I met him at a boat ramp in Gloucester City, N.J., just across the Delaware River from downtown Philadelphia in September 2024, he looked as healthy as an ox. Nothing about his demeanor suggested sickness or weakness. Gibson had, of course, just received a round of on-the-water therapy with Dr. Mike Iaconelli, the man who's been prescribing a healthy dose of never giving up no matter what obstacle you face for his entire career in professional bass fishing. How these two fighters came to share a boat is uplifting and endearing, but fulfilling a dream of fishing with Ike isn't where Gibson's story ends. Both men understand that no matter how much you overcome, there will always be more never giving up to do.

Gibson has been a lifetime member of B.A.S.S. since 1994. For the last 40 years, he's been fishing local bass tournaments throughout upstate New York. He cut his teeth on the tidal Hudson River, which proved useful for a trip with Iaconelli. The tide swings on the lower Delaware River — Ike's home turf — can be daunting to the uninitiated. When I met up with the duo after their trip on a warm, bluebird afternoon, I worried Gibson might have been out of his element. He was not.

"Gerry's first fish was world-class!" a beaming Iaconelli belted as we shook hands. "It was just over 3 pounds!"

Gibson had stuck the bass on a white ChatterBait and made sure I knew tidal water didn't faze him at all. Then, the otherwise soft-spoken man quickly got on to ribbing Ike for being so pumped over such a small fish. The Delaware may have plenty of largemouth, but it's not exactly known for kicking out trophies.

"Now you know why I scream when I catch a 12-incher here!" Iaconelli fired back with a laugh.

As a young man, Gibson idolized Rick Clunn, Jimmy Houston and Roland Martin. He's a worm devotee through and through, convinced he could beat just about anybody under the right conditions with a Mister Twister Ringworm — one of his all-time favorite baits. Thinking about the era in which Gibson fell in love with pro bass fishing, I was intrigued by his attraction to Iaconelli.

"He's a serious fisherman, but he likes to joke around a little and have fun," Gibson explained. "That's why I like him so much. He's not so uptight and, to me, a big part of life is having fun with what you do. I had no expectations today. I just wanted to go out and have a good time fishing."

Gibson did, however, expect an autograph. He presented Iaconelli with a copy of the October 2003 *Bassmaster* Magazine. On the cover, a young Ike wearing jean shorts and sandals is ripping a bass out of the water after appearing to have fallen backward on the deck of his boat. The cover line reads: Ike over the Top. For 21 years, Gibson kept that issue in crisp, mint condition. His admiration for Iaconelli dates back so far that when his son, Jeremy, caught wind of AARP's "Wish of a Lifetime" program, he nominated his dad, hoping it would lead to a chance for him to fish with his idol.

The purpose of "Wish of a Lifetime" is to help older adults fulfill dreams or lifelong goals or add a meaningful component to their lives that's been missing. Gibson couldn't stop himself from crying when he spoke about how much it meant that Jeremy would propose a trip with Iaconelli and work with the organization through a process that

The trip was set up through AARP's "Wish of a Lifetime" program, and the two anglers hit it off big time fishing the Delaware River. Gibson is currently fighting cancer again — and fully expects to win for a second time. Photos: Courtesy of Mike Iaconelli

took almost two years to turn into a reality. But part of that emotion also stemmed from Gibson reflecting on his life during the time leading up to the big day on the Delaware.

In December 2023, after 21 months of intense treatment, Gibson was declared cancer free. For anyone in his shoes, it would be the ultimate victory, but the win was sadly clouded. While Gibson was fighting his battle, his wife's health took a sudden and unexpected turn. The person he fought so hard to not leave left him on Sept. 11, 2023, due to a blood clot. Sandra passed away one year to the day before he finally got to chase bass with Iaconelli. He told us how they fished together often and how Sandra once "kicked his butt" by landing a 7-pound largemouth on an old Zebco 33. Then, as if he hadn't been through enough hardship, Gibson found out just weeks before meeting Ike that his cancer had returned. But had I not asked about such things, Gibson likely wouldn't have brought them up. He struck me as the kind that's always putting one foot in front of the other, and today those feet took him fishing — a pastime that has provided solace his entire life. He and Iaconelli bonded over this almost instantly.

"People go through so many different things in their lives," said Iaconelli. "I've gone through plenty. It's nice that this has always been my saving grace when things are bad. I always go fishing, and I swear it has the power to turn things around for me."

The river session was medicinal for both anglers. Together they put up eight bass (four would have been tournament keepers if you're wondering), but, as Iaconelli noted, "a magical day doesn't always involve a lot of catching." He's right. It was slick-calm during Gibson's visit, and the start of the falling tide was early — but not too early — in the morning. You simply couldn't have asked for better conditions. For Iaconelli, just sharing a piece of water with Gibson that was so meaningful to him and his career made the outing that much sweeter.

"I get very few days of true fun fishing," said Iaconelli. "It's rare to be on the water when I'm not in a tournament or worrying about which sponsor lures I have to throw. Today I made a new friend and we just had fun. I loved it."

Iaconelli also loved Gibson's determination on the water. Through the years, he's fished with people from all walks of life, but it's always refreshing to share his boat with an angler that has passion and the ability to make beautiful, precise presentations with a baitcaster instead of "winding up in the trees," as a smirking Ike put it. The tidal Delaware is an easy place for the best fishermen to blank. It's also an intricate puzzle that often needs to be put together differently this time than the last. Given how hard the river will make you work for bites, Iaconelli was pleased with the day and grateful to have had Gibson along to help him with those puzzle pieces. For Gibson, the outing provided much-needed respite, but he was prepared for the puzzles ahead, those that required carrying much more weight than a 3-pound bass.

At dinner that evening, Iaconelli gave Gibson his 2023 tournament jersey. The gift seemed to overwhelm the quiet man from upstate New York at first, but suddenly he quipped about how jealous all his bass fishing buddies would be when they saw it hanging up in his house and the table erupted in laughter. Later, Iaconelli sent Gibson off with a big hug, almost as if transferring a huge shot of "you got this" energy to a man he'd just met but understood very well. As I said goodbye to Gibson, I asked if he was ready for what was ahead. Was he ready for another fight?

"I beat this once," he said with full confidence. "I'll beat it again."

Never give up.

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Beat The Big Chill For A Personal Best

Nippy weather can drain your desire to fish, but rest assured, your new PB is out there

By DR. TODD A. KUHN

WINTER USHERS IN a change of venues for anglers, as many have winterized and stowed their boat. Now they've turned their attention to tagging that late-season buck or are holed up in the house watching football. Seemingly, for all but the most robust, chasing bass with frosty fingers and numb toes just isn't their thing.

However, now is one of the best times of the year to tally a personal best. The odds are in your favor as your favorite fishing haunts are all but devoid of pleasure boaters, pesky personal watercraft and, most often, angling pressure. And, while brisk water temps have turned bass a bit tight-lipped, the bruisers are still willing to bite — albeit selectively.

Alabama pro Steve Kennedy says winter fishing is a must for big-bass enthusiasts. Photo: Steve Bowman

Beat The Big Chill
For A Personal Best

G-Ratt Baits Weedless Vibrating Jig with G-Ratt Baits Mixer

G-Ratt Baits Sneaky Pete

Kennedy says bass are often as big during winter as they'll be any time of year. That can create the opportunity of a lifetime. Photo: Shane Durrance

We asked veteran Elite Series angler Steve Kennedy to share his cold-water, big-fish insight with us. Kennedy has 22 years of professional angling to his credit and is known for his knack for catching really big fish. In fact, the Alabama native brought a 40-pound, 7-ounce bag to the scales on Day 3 of the 2007 Elite event on Clear Lake. His 122-pound, 14-ounce total bested the field and set the record for the largest winning weight in Bassmaster history at the time. Interestingly, Kennedy earned a degree in mechanical engineering from Auburn. Out on the water, he leans on his analytical thinking when solving the cold-water, big-fish calculus.

Here are his insider "how-to" tips sure to help you shake off winter's chill and boat your personal best now.

IN THE ZONE

Admittedly, January and February can be tough months weather-wise. Depending on your physical location, bass can be doing a variety of things. In the North, frigid waters can have the fish on lockdown and barely moving, while in the Deep South, they could be considering a move up for the prespawn.

According to Kennedy — a three-time Elite Series winner — your decision on how to approach big winter fish depends mostly on the weather.

"Physiologically, fish are now as big as they'll be most of the year. As a general rule, they gain between 5% to 10% of their total body weight prior to spawning. For me, on any given winter day, depending on the state I'm fishing, the air temperatures can range from 20 to 80 degrees, and the water temperatures can be anywhere from the 40s to 60s. So, obviously my approach depends on any number of varying factors. Generally, if the weather and water temperatures are cold, big bass will still be in their winter pattern — which in most instances means they'll be deep."

Of course, other factors beyond air and water temperatures dictate where Kennedy begins his search for monsters.

Weighty Decision

So, you just battled and boated your best bass ever. Once you've snapped that selfie to record the occasion for perpetuity, what's next?

The Rapala Touch Screen Scale Tournament Model offers anglers a precision measure of their fish's actual weight. The scale features a large digital touch screen — one that is easy to operate even with wet hands. The scale stores up to eight individual fish weights.

For the tournament angler, the Touch Screen Scale Tournament Model comes standard with eight numerical culling floats

to help manage your tourney limit. The culling floats are matched by color to the unit for quick identification of your smallest cull fish. Each fish's weight is individually displayed on the unit's screen for ease of tracking.

The scale stores a running cumulative total of your fish weights that is continuously displayed. This feature allows you to know exactly how many pounds you have before heading to the scales. The unit runs for up to 400 hours on two AA batteries (not included) and has a backup memory feature that retains stored data if battery power is ever lost.

MSRP: $73.99 **rapala.com**

Depending on where he is, Kennedy knows the fish could still be deep or could be moving up preparing to spawn. Photo: Kyle Jessie

> **“I’ve found the biggest females — those ‘personal-best-class fish’ — will relate very tightly to cover as they move.”**

“Water clarity plays a key role in where big fish will haunt now. In very clear water, they might be as deep as 45 feet of water; however, it’s been my experience that most big fish are now in the 18- to 25-foot range. If the water is clear to mostly clear, and the water temperatures are right, the big females will begin to think about moving up.”

When the big females begin to move, Kennedy narrows his search to several specific areas.

“I’ve found the biggest females — those ‘personal-best-class fish’ — will relate very tightly to cover as they move. I think the cover provides them with a sense of security as they’re not moving much now due to the cold water.”

When targeting these fish, Kennedy keeps an eye out for brushpiles and creek-channel drops, especially in the back of coves. “If you’re fishing new water, a quality sonar will help you locate this structure. If there have been any warming rains, I’ll start in the backs of creeks as the rain warms the water, often drawing big fish there like a magnet.”

Kennedy narrows his search even further when he feels big fish are pushing up. If he knows the big females are moving, he focuses his attention on channel-swing banks in the backs of creeks.

“When I know big fish are present, if they are really pushing up, I’ll concentrate on the very last channel-swing bank in the very back of the cove. They’re oftentimes here because these are close to the flats where they’ll eventually spawn.”

However, Kennedy warns, “Keep in mind, these fish are still dealing with cold fronts, so they are typically in areas where they can come up and sun and then drop off into colder water adjacent to places they intend to spawn. If a hard cold front pushes through and the big bite stalls, look for the nearest deep water; they’re most likely holed up there.”

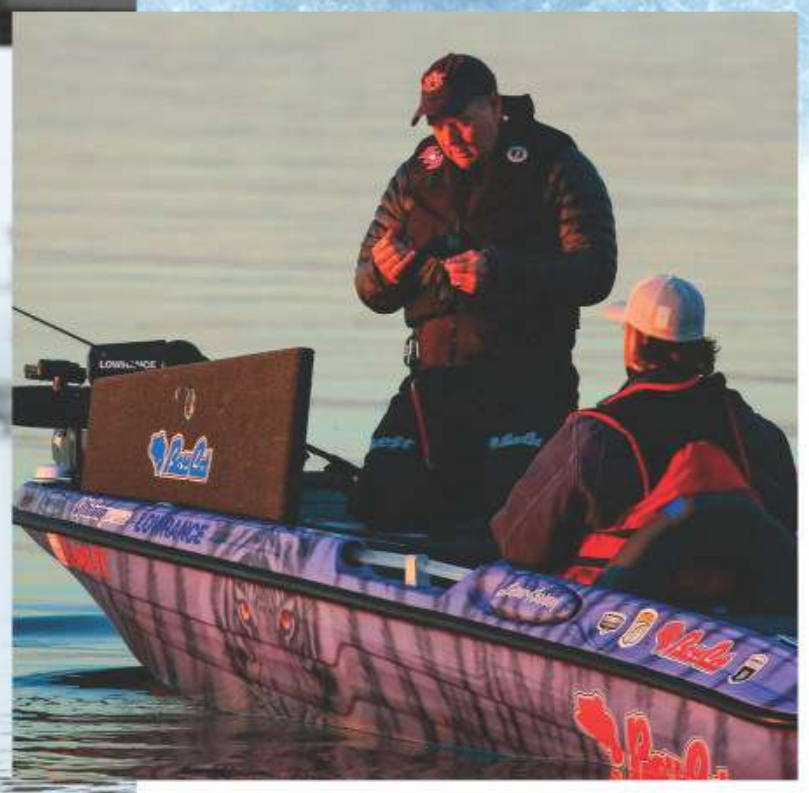
BIG BAIT — BIG FISH?

When fish are on the move, the 11-time Bassmaster Classic qualifier (who finished second in 2017) has a few go-to big-fish baits. Kennedy is best known for his big swimbait prowess, so it’s not surprising he depends on these as well as jigs, both football and vibrating.

Beat The Big Chill

For A Personal Best

Photo: Shane Durrance



True to his reputation, Kennedy often fishes a large swimbait on the bottom for his biggest winter bass.
Photo: James Overstreet

"A fat football jig on the bottom is tough to beat for big fish, but I've had tremendous success lately with a large vibrating jig. I like the G-Ratt Baits Weedless Vibrating Jig in 3/8 to 3/4 ounce with a G-Ratt Baits Mixer jig trailer. It's a big-fish confidence bait for me." Kennedy fishes the vibrating jig on a 7-foot, 6-inch heavy action rod with 65-pound braid and a 25- to 30-pound leader. When fishing for that big bite, he concentrates on keeping the bait as tight to the cover as he can — especially rocks and wood.

"When fishing cover, be prepared to get your arm broke because the big fish will smash that [vibrating jig]. The trick is putting it on the bottom, shaking it, then fluttering it up two or three 'thumps' and letting it settle back to the bottom. I think it looks like a crawfish trying to escape," says the Alabama native.

Of course, Kennedy always has his swimbaits tied on. His favorite is a G-Ratt Baits Sneaky Pete, which he thinks of as an oversized jerkbait he can fish slowly. When looking for that truly once-in-a-lifetime bite, Kennedy also recommends fishing a relatively large swimbait on the bottom.

G-Ratt Baits Weedless Executioner

"In 2007 I won on Clear Lake throwing this Huddleston rig. It was, in fact, the first time I had thrown big swimbaits. Depending on water depth and the quality of fish available, I would throw a 12 or 16 rate of fall [ROF] jig hook-style Huddleston. You want to keep it near the bottom and move it at a creep where it is just ticking the bottom."

When not throwing the Huddleston, he relies on the 6-inch G-Ratt Baits Weedless Executioner swimbait rigged on a 6/0 "beast-style" hook.

"I like the Executioner because it's very weedless and can be fished on the bottom without snagging. It has two pronounced pectoral fins that allow it to remain upright on the bottom. When fishing it very slowly, it looks like a small trash fish crawling along the bottom. This bait lets me fish it almost like a Texas-rigged worm [or a football jig]. It's definitely another big-bite getter."

Plastisol Peril

Wintertime's chilly water can have a detrimental effect on your soft plastics. Plastic baits are generally made from plastisol, which is a thermoplastic. Frigid water temperatures shift thermoplastic molecular chains — their basic building blocks — and tighten them (for lack of a better description). This tightening on the molecular level impacts their ability to articulate (move). While that sounds very technical, simply said, the colder the water temperature, the less action a plastic bait will have.

For these reasons, the baits you choose to fish matter when it gets chilly. A good general rule of thumb is the thicker a bait's profile, the more it is affected by cold temperatures. Thinly shaped and profiled lures such as swimbaits, with their narrow tails, and large boot tails retain their action better than those with fatter, thicker profiles. For the most part, the less bulk the plastic has, the more action it retains in cold water.

In some instances, the stymied action of thick baits may actually help attract big fish as they perceive an oddly moving (i.e., unnatural) bait as "injured." In other cases, the impaired action may look unnatural and keep fish from biting what they perceive as "artificial."

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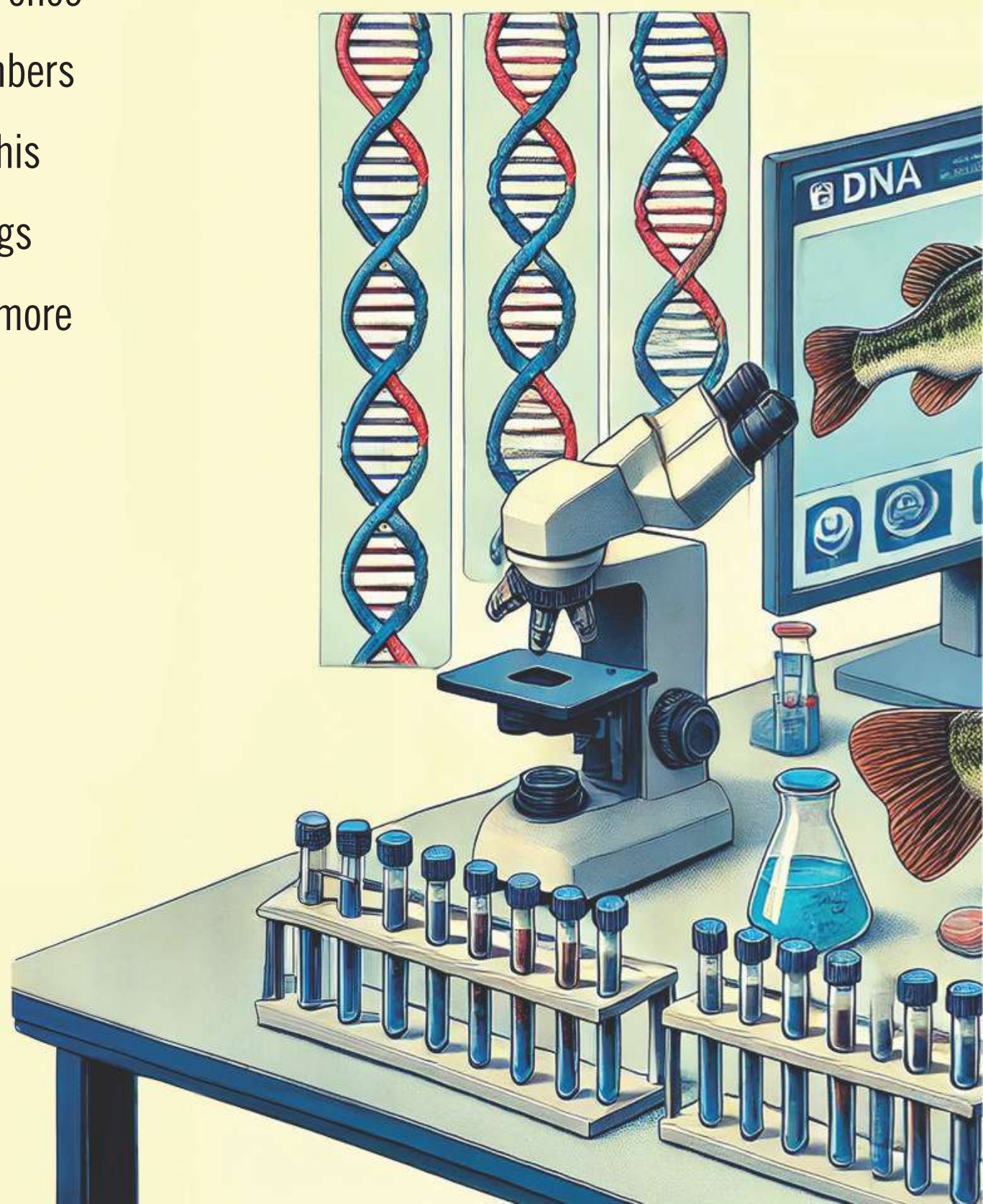
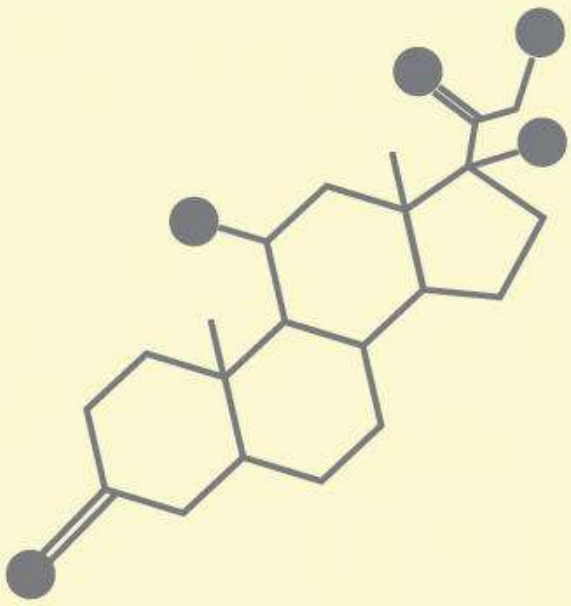
World Record Controversy?

By KEN DUKE AND JOSH SAKMAR

World records were once decided by the numbers on a scale. But in this modern world, things have gotten much more complicated





ARE YOU FAMILIAR with binary computer code? In essence, it reduces text and images to a series of 0s and 1s. If someone were to change that sequence — even slightly — it could totally change what you see on your smartphone or computer screen.

Genetics is similar, but instead of 0s and 1s, you have the letters A, T, C and G in paired strings. Change some letters, and nothing happens; change others, and it's the difference between the recently reclassified *Micropterus salmoides* (Florida bass) and *Micropterus nigricans* (largemouth bass). Change even more, and you might get a two-headed flying monster ... but we digress.

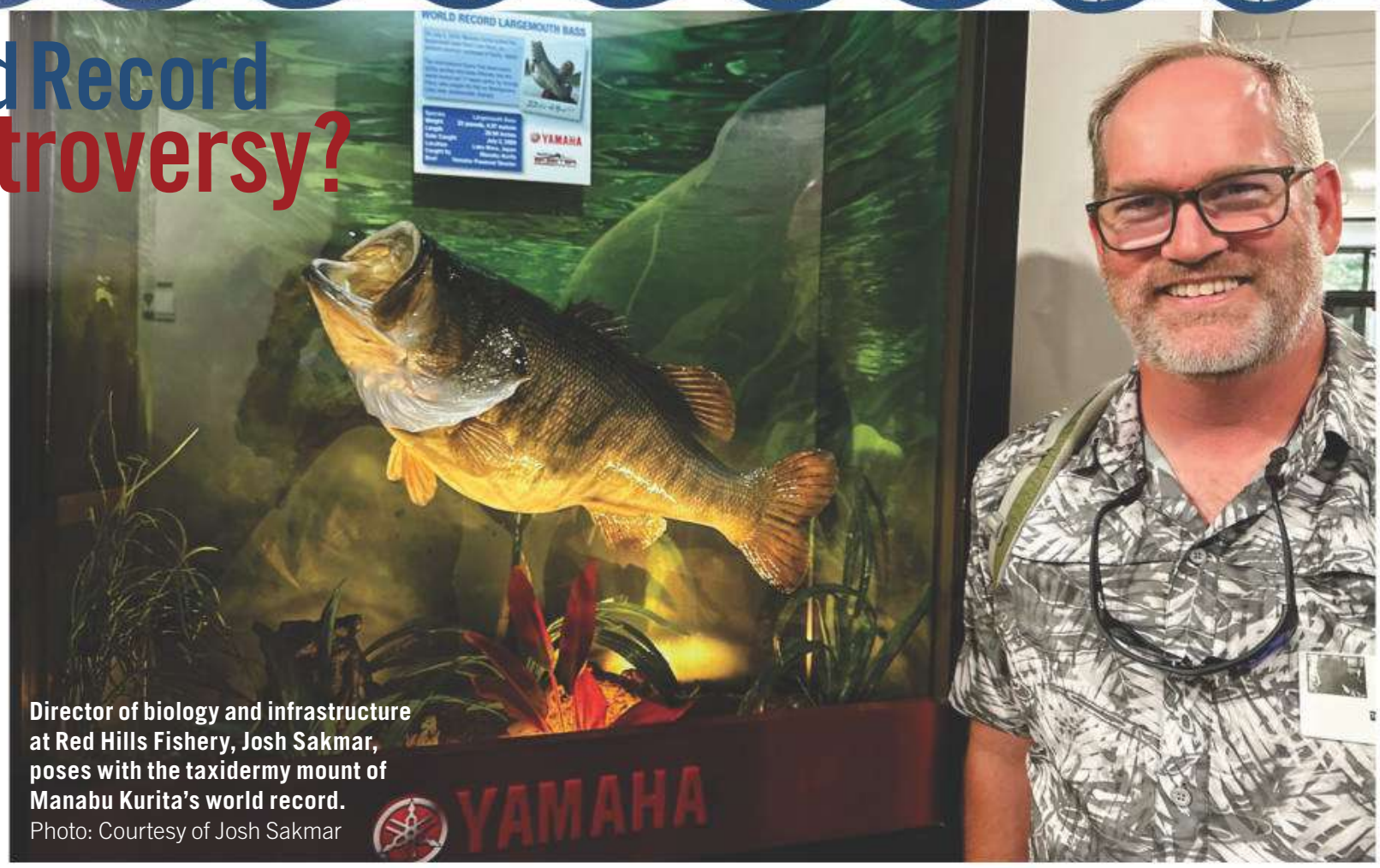
When we identify the letters at a specific position that are usually different between two species of bass, we have "markers." Florida bass most often are a T at a particular spot, while largemouth bass are most often a C at that spot.

There are all sorts of "ifs" and "buts" here, especially regarding how letters are analyzed. One fish is represented by hundreds of millions of letters, and a bunch of fish must be looked at to find differences. This isn't feasible by hand or with a desktop computer. Supercomputers and patience are required, which is why whole-genome sequencing has rarely been used in fisheries until recently — it's expensive. Instead, fisheries geneticists have used other technologies that break the code into smaller, predictable chunks of markers to assess strain, back when Florida and Northern bass were considered the same species.

Different approaches for analyzing chunks have been developed for the times and circumstances in which they were used, leading to varying standards. For example, a university might use slightly different markers than a state lab. Though most markers overlap, a few may differ. Additionally, a university might define a "pure" Florida fish as having 90% of their markers, while a state lab might require 98.5%.

Illustration: Artie Fitchell

World Record Controversy?



Director of biology and infrastructure at Red Hills Fishery, Josh Sakmar, poses with the taxidermy mount of Manabu Kurita's world record.
Photo: Courtesy of Josh Sakmar

A recent Yale study ("Phylogenomics and species delimitation of the economically important Black Basses") sought to provide new insight by using a broad genetic marker approach to redefine species boundaries in black bass. This work suggested the reclassification of *Micropterus salmoides* as the Florida bass and validated *Micropterus nigricans* as the largemouth bass. The findings highlighted important implications for conservation and fisheries management to be used by the scientific community.

The problem is that the information is so new that no one has developed a cost-effective and easily accessible approach to applying the results. Without that, universities and the various states can still differ in how they identify the various species and respective genetic purity standards.

So what, right? Not so fast!

Who's In Charge Here?

The American Fisheries Society (AFS) is the organization generally charged with setting the standards for fish species taxonomy in North America. For AFS, it's all about the science — as it should be. One part of ASF's mission is to prevent confusion by unifying the scientific community on scientific names, ensuring that a common name like Nobulb Snaggletooth is recognized as *Astronesthes richardsoni* and not confused with the Twinlobe Snaggletooth (*Astronesthes bilobatus*). Scientific names always take the lead, and heaven help you should you ever rely solely on common names in a research manuscript. The AFS has officially done the same thing with Florida and largemouth bass based on the work by Yale.

The recordkeepers at the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) considered it a great idea and quickly adopted these designations as a conservation initiative in 2024. Florida and largemouth bass are now considered two distinct species for the IGFA's world records. The largemouth bass retains the 22-pound, 5-ounce all-tackle record, with credit going to George Perry (1932) and Manabu Kurita (2009). A new Florida all-tackle world record was recently set in Texas at 15-13. All new record submissions must be genetically certified under direction of your corresponding local agency.

And, by the way, there is no world-record classification for a cross between the new species. None.

What Does This Mean For Anglers Who Dream Of Catching A Record Bass?

First, you'll need genetic testing for a potential world record. If you're in Northern states, no worries — you are never going to break the 22-4 largemouth bass record, so you can relax. But in Southern states, the Florida record race is on, so make sure you have your tissue sampling kits in the boat! Just don't ask where to get those, as there are no tests currently available that have been standardized to align with the IGFA-supported work. Instead, you're directed to contact your local agency to figure it out. This means a record set in one state using a university lab may not count in another state with its own lab.

Second, as no record category exists for hybrid fish — though they have been occurring naturally for thousands of years — potential world records might be accepted by anglers but not officially recognized by the IGFA. If you catch a potential record, we suggest you shop it around until you find a test that gives you the results you want. Remember, though, if you catch a 23-pound bass that's a hybrid according to whatever test you did, you're currently out of luck.

What Sense Does That Make?

Though getting a genetic test for your fish might sound frustrating, a more baffling issue is applying the old records to what had been considered Northern bass. The IGFA has decided that the previous world records for largemouth bass — including both Northern and Florida strains — now apply to the new common-name largemouth bass (*Micropterus nigricans*). This decision is based on preserving the record's history by common name despite the new scientific name of *Micropterus salmoides* dictating that the old records stick as Florida bass. And, as we know by now, common names are a no-no in science, where strictly defined scientific names are the rule.

The trouble lies in the circumstantial evidence for the species designations of the Perry and Kurita records that does not support their fish as being pure largemouth. Since Perry and his family reportedly ate his fish and there's no authenticated photo, the only genetic support is where it was reportedly caught (south Georgia), which, according to Yale, is a new Florida genetic zone. This suggests the fish likely had Florida genes, probably being a hybrid or pure Florida rather than a pure largemouth.

Kurita caught his fish in Japan's Lake Biwa, where Florida and largemouth bass aren't native, so we can't rely on geography. Instead, stocking history and photos must be used. The IGFA considered Kurita's submission one of the cleanest for record consideration, and photos of the catch suggest Florida genes according to scale counts. Additionally, Lake Biwa has a history of Florida and largemouth bass stocking. Put these two together, and the conclusion is Kurita's fish is also either a hybrid or a Florida and not a pure largemouth.

If only there was a way to be certain about the genetics.

If only ...

Texas angler Kyle Hall caught the new Florida bass world record at Texas' O.H. Ivie Lake in March 2024. Photo: Courtesy of Kyle Hall

The Plot Thickens And The Work Begins

On a sweltering July day in 2024, three fisheries biologists entered the lobby of a large facility just outside Atlanta. They came armed with the tools of their trade, including scalpels, scissors and vials. As they waited for security to process their names and generate badges, they masked their giddiness behind a veil of professionalism and authority. They knew what was on the other side of the locked doors.

Once granted access, they were escorted down a hallway lined with offices and conference rooms to behold their objective: the skin-mounted bass caught in Japan by Kurita in 2009, the largest ever caught fair and square and properly certified by a record-keeping organization at 22 pounds, 4.97 ounces. It rested behind a glass partition in the North American headquarters of Yamaha Motor Corp. in Kennesaw, Ga., and the biologists were there to sample its DNA.

As the scientists began their work, the excitement was obvious, if only to them. They fully understood the importance of the fish and the task at hand.

The fish was carefully transferred to a breakroom where the work could be done. The scientists moved carefully to collect enough material for the necessary lab work. From the back of the mount, two scales, a portion of the pectoral fin and what was possibly gill tissue were removed and placed into vials and specimen bags for downstream analysis. The entire process was documented, and chain of custody forms were signed. The group shook hands with their escorts, expressed their sincere appreciation and walked toward the door with an air of confidence and professionalism. Once we got out of sight, we exploded with joy and giggled our way back to our respective offices. Mission accomplished.

The Results Are In!

Based on a whole genome approach conducted by The Center for Aquaculture Technologies and 28 of 36 single nucleotide polymorphism markers used to certify fish for the state of Florida, Kurita's fish is at best 2.7% largemouth and 97.3% Florida. Therefore, with this approach, and according to the state's 98.5% threshold, the fish could be considered a hybrid. According to standards that have historically been used by the state of Georgia through Auburn University (which has used a 95% threshold), the fish could be a new Florida bass world record. The one thing we know for certain is that Kurita's world-record largemouth bass is not a pure largemouth bass — not by a long shot.

And that's a problem.

Calling Their BLUFF

By DAVID A. BROWN
SENIOR WRITER

Fishing is a lot like poker whenever you go. But fish hold their cards especially close to the vest during winter

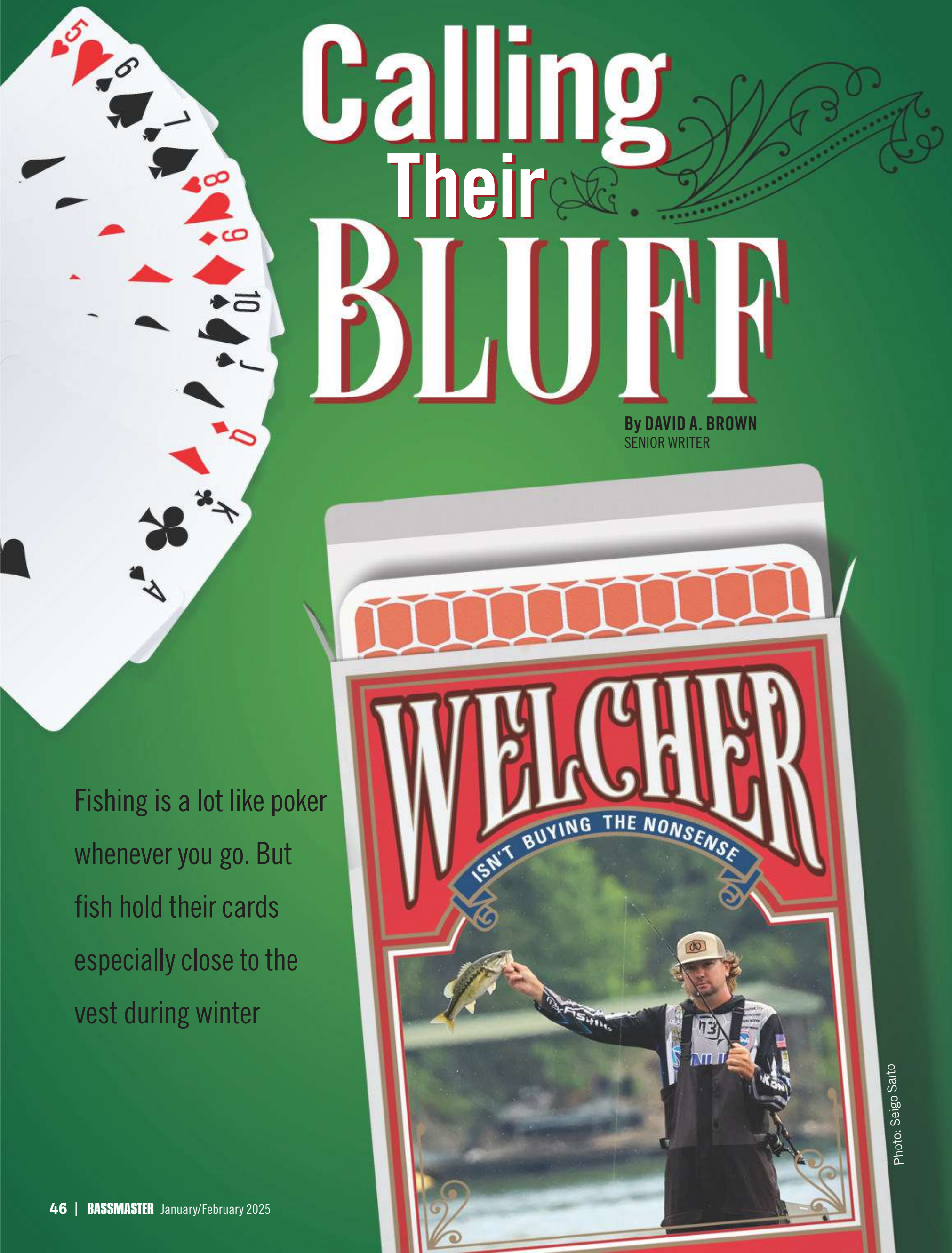
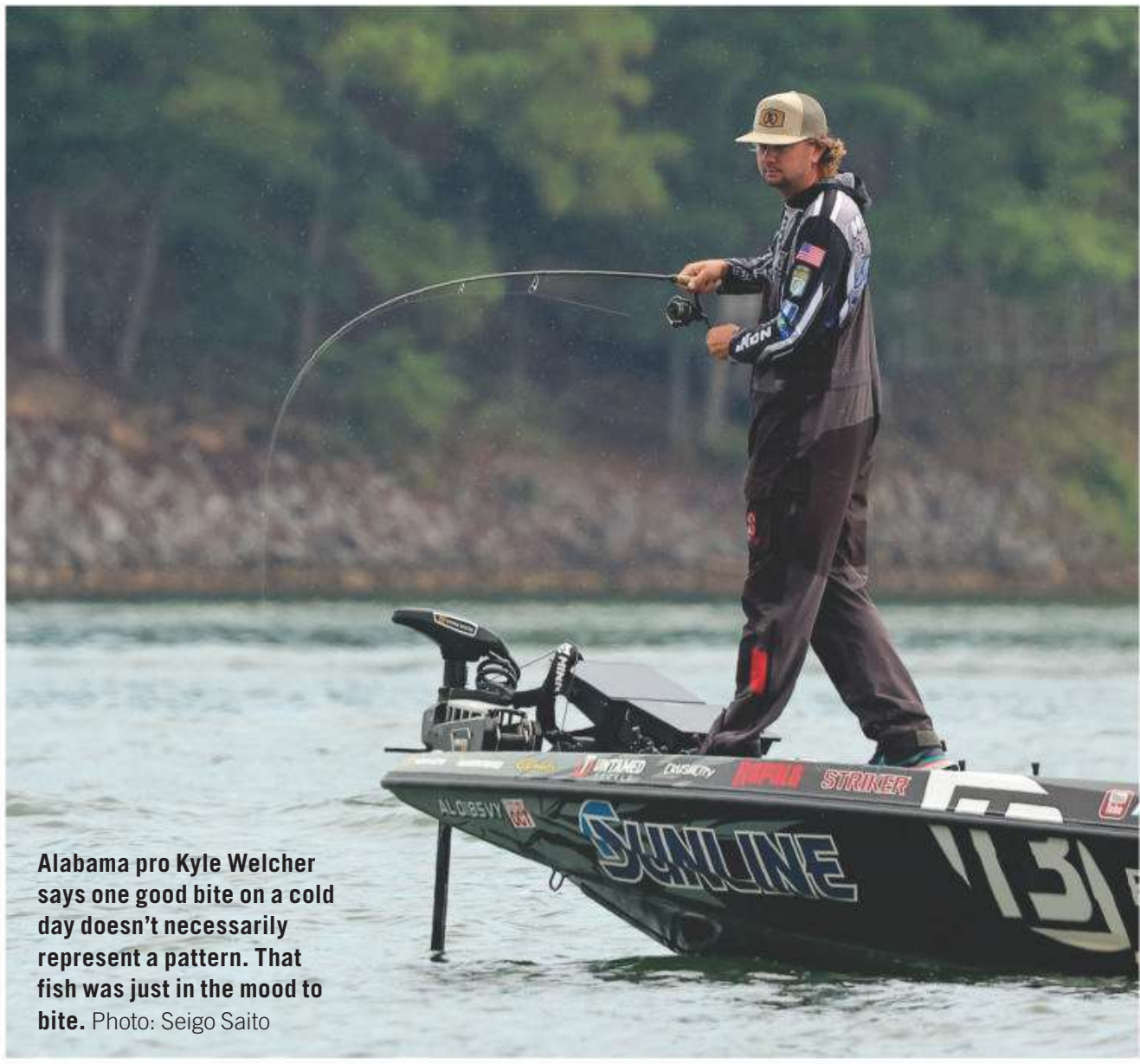


Photo: Seigo Saito

KYLE WELCHER CELEBRATED his 21st birthday in Biloxi, Mississippi's IP Casino and, following many years of family card games and online study, he preceded his Elite career with an impressive level of professional poker play. Suffice it to say, one of the key skills he developed is one that also serves him well on the water: reading the opponent and making strategic moves.

Such perception always helps, but Welcher said it's particularly critical for the cold season. It's during this time the fish really hold their cards close — less for any competitive intent than for seasonal disposition.



Alabama pro Kyle Welcher says one good bite on a cold day doesn't necessarily represent a pattern. That fish was just in the mood to bite. Photo: Seigo Saito

"In the wintertime, fishing is even more like poker than it is in the spring or summer because it's even more difficult to pattern fish," the 2023 Progressive Insurance Bassmaster Angler of the Year said. "It's like one fish here, one fish there, so you have to really dial in and pick up on the temperament of that fish.

"I've caught fish in November or December on a buzzbait that were extremely aggressive, but that doesn't mean it's going to be a pattern. That one fish was just in the mood. So, you really have to keep an open mind and read them all individually."

As Welcher notes, you can't let 'em bluff you into burning daylight trying to establish consistency from what was actually a one-off. Your ace in the hole: a realistic outlook.

"This isn't the time of year when you're going to be able to run a pattern and get 25 bites," he said. "That one [aggressive] fish might mislead you, as far as the overall pattern, but you have to catch that one fish to start your analysis.

"It's just like a poker hand: You know your two cards, and you know the way you want the hand to go. But every time another card comes out, or another player makes a bet or makes a decision, that changes the way that hand plays out. You don't want to go in with too many preconceptions."

Read The Tells

Nose twitches, breathing patterns, posture shifts; every poker player has a "tell" — an observable movement or adjustment that reveals an emotional and/or consciousness spike. It could be a positive or negative reaction, but learning to spot these tells provides strategic insight that guides your own decisions.

"In the winter, one of the most important things to notice is the time of day when that fish bit, because a lot of times, the feeding window in the winter is a lot shorter," Welcher said. "It's not like in the summer, when they're going to eat anything that's in front of them almost any time.

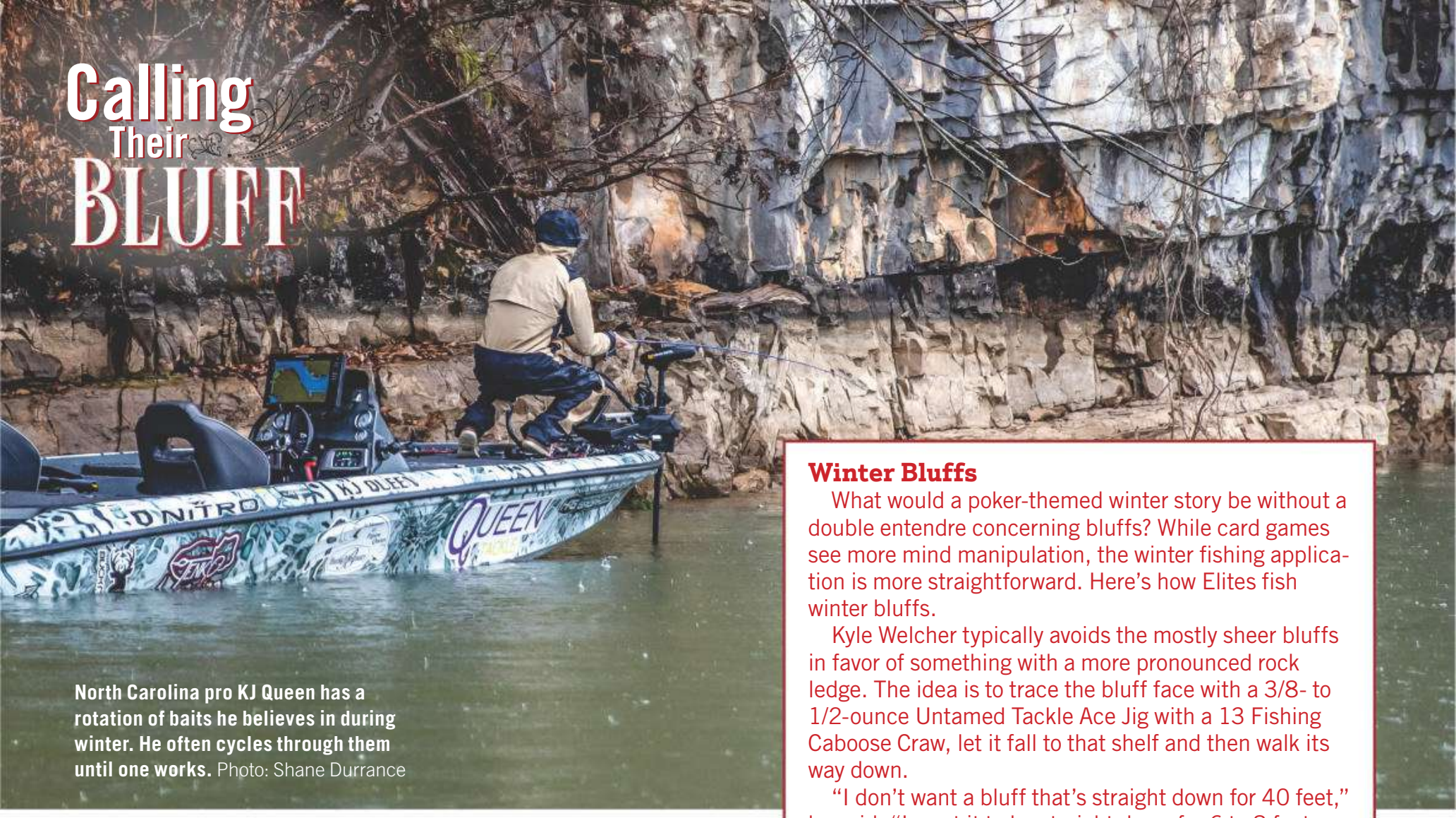
"They may only eat from, like [11 a.m. to 2 p.m.], when the water has gotten to its warmest and the light penetration is the most. Lakes typically have less light penetration in the winter than they do in the summer, so those fish are going to be more aggressive and mobile in that period of the day."

Knowing exactly when that feeding window opens often comes by observing bite aggression. Welcher typically throws darker plastics and brighter hard baits during a winter morning in an effort to garner attention from sluggish fish. During the midday feed, he fares best with natural colors.

"During that feeding window, if you're throwing a really bright lure, you'll start hooking them outside the mouth a little more," Welcher said. "Then you'll switch to a more natural bait, and they eat it a little better.

"You're not going to get a ton of bites that time of year, so when you do get a bite, you really have to pay attention and focus on exactly when and how they ate it, [like] if they ate it right after it deflected off something."

Calling Their BLUFF



North Carolina pro KJ Queen has a rotation of baits he believes in during winter. He often cycles through them until one works. Photo: Shane Durrance

Also note these tells.

Reaction Bite vs. Feeding Bite: Welcher said the way a fish fights says as much about its winter mood as the bite itself.

"Did they fight super-hard, or did they come straight to the surface?" he said. "A lot of times, if it's a feeding bite, those fish will fight extremely hard, but whenever it's cold and it's a reaction bite, that fish just committed to that bait and then they just came to the surface and wallowed a little bit and came straight to the boat.

"They weren't really in an aggressive mood to begin with; you just made them react to that bait while it was in front of their face."

Elite Series pro Jamie Hartman agrees and notes that his preferred winter presentation, the jerkbait, provides a clear gauge of fish aggression. Are they just slapping at the bait, or are they getting it?

"When it's cold and I'm fishing a jerkbait, a lot of it is how hard that line jumps," Hartman said. "Does it tick? Does it jump? Does it jump and take off? When it jumps and takes off, they're fired up. Now we can cover more water."

Food Mood: Elite pro KJ Queen's first point of study is baitfish — specifically, how bass are relating to the food. Forward-facing sonar proves invaluable here, and once he finds fish suspending around the food, he'll alternate his dependable bait presentations to see what triggers the bites.

"In the wintertime, my starting point would be a 1/2- to 3/4-ounce Queen Tackle Live Sonar Jighead with a Jenko Tremor Shad trailer," Queen said. "Because the jig is made of tungsten, it's denser than lead, so it gets down to the fish quicker, and you can see it better on your sonar because it shows up like a ball of fire.

"I like the Tremor Shad in a 3- or 4-inch [version] because in the wintertime they usually like to eat smaller baitfish. That bait's straight tail makes it fall even faster. When fish are in the bait, they're moving fast and they want to eat, so you have to get your bait to them really fast."

Color Code: When Welcher catches a bass with red on its lips and inner mouth, he knows the fish are eating crawfish. Some of that may come from bumping their mouths on rocks, but the inner mouth coloration probably comes from the crawfish body.

Winter Bluffs

What would a poker-themed winter story be without a double entendre concerning bluffs? While card games see more mind manipulation, the winter fishing application is more straightforward. Here's how Elites fish winter bluffs.

Kyle Welcher typically avoids the mostly sheer bluffs in favor of something with a more pronounced rock ledge. The idea is to trace the bluff face with a 3/8- to 1/2-ounce Untamed Tackle Ace Jig with a 13 Fishing Caboose Craw, let it fall to that shelf and then walk its way down.

"I don't want a bluff that's straight down for 40 feet," he said. "I want it to be straight down for 6 to 8 feet, then hit some rock. I'll drag it off that rock and then go straight down again. I want something extra."

KJ Queen keeps the standard jerkbait handy, but he also likes a 1/4-ounce Queen Tackle Live Sonar Jig with a Jenko Tremor Shad for a countdown presentation to bass suspending around baitfish.

"They're very sight-oriented, so on a cloudy or overcast day, the higher up they sit, the better they can see," Queen said. "On a sunnier day, they're going to be deep because they can see better with the light penetration."

Slow And Steady: Also a fan of jigs for winter bluffs, Jamie Hartman uses a heavy-wire finesse model from Crusher Lures with a nonaggressive, chunk-style bait. Avoiding trailers with flapping action, he wants a slow fall and a creeping walk down a stair-step bluff bottom.

"It's tough to fish a jig on bluffs because you can't cover a lot of water, but it can be very productive on good fish," Hartman said. "It's a slow, methodical presentation — just feeling the bottom. Don't let the bait leave the bottom unless it's dropping from shelf to shelf.

"Throughout the day, the bites will go from really light, where you can't even tell they're on there, to where you feel them smack it. If the fish are suspended, you don't want to fish below them."

Also, a bass' overall coloration tells Welcher where the fish has been living. A "white" or noticeably lighter-color fish caught shallow recently came from deep water. Conversely, a darker fish has been living around shallower cover long enough to take on that dimmer hue. (This is critical info as the prespawn approaches.)

"If I catch one that's really white up shallow — if I caught him early in the morning, that's a really good sign that I'm on a really good stretch," Welcher said. "But if I catch him during that midday feeding window, a lot of times, that means I've found a place where they're feeding, but they're not living there.

"Those fish may not be there in the morning; they may only be there during that afternoon feeding window. If I catch one that's dark-colored during that feeding window, I know that's a fish that lives on that place."

Similarly, when Welcher catches the lighter-colored bass around bait schools suspended in a river or creek channel, he knows those fish have been in that deep water for several weeks and, in a winter scenario, they'll likely remain there. Factoring this into his game plan gives him one more read on the opponent's hand.

Dealer's Choice

Poker or fishing, you gotta play the hand you're dealt, but you need a general game plan — a starting point. Welcher's is a 3/8-ounce Untamed Tackle Ace Jig with a 13 Fishing Caboose Craw. Minimal motion with a slow fall rate best fits the mood of a stable winter day.

Now, sleet, freezing rain, maybe a little snow definitely minimize the boat ramp traffic, but Queen will not hit the snooze button. He's aware of the forthcoming misery, but he knows perseverance can produce fireworks.

"If it's going to snow, I want to be on the water 100% of the time, because the fish are usually biting," Queen said. "Something about it really fires them up and, usually, they're feeding on the baitfish if you get cloudy weather in the wintertime."

On these nasty days, Welcher expects the fish to bet big: "That's where I have the hardest time getting them to bite any slow-moving bait. Like I said, there's not a lot of light penetration in the winter, so when it's super-windy or cloudy, it's very difficult for them to commit to the jig and you just can't get enough bites on it.

"So, whenever I'm faced with those conditions, I try to rely on the reaction bite more than anything. That's when I go cover as much water as possible with a Spro Little John squarebill."

Throwing his squarebill on the edges of winter habitat, Welcher targets rocks, points and laydowns close to the main channel in about 5 feet of water. The fish are certainly not in a chasing mood, but Welcher finds he can force their hand by banging the bait off something near their face.

"It almost goes against conventional wisdom that when it's cold and raining or sleeting or snowing, you'd think you should go slower," Welcher said. "You don't want to go too fast, but in my opinion, you want to throw a bait that allows you to cover water and make them react."

Of course, how and where the fish react offer more of those wintertime "tells."

"If I'm throwing my squarebill up there and they're eating after I make two turns of the reel, I'm reading that the fish was in a foot and a half of water," Welcher said. "If I'm throwing it down a laydown tree and deflecting off a limb in 2 feet of water, and then I deflect it all the way down and a fish bites off the tip of the tree when my bait was 7 feet deep, I know that fish was nowhere near the bank — it was suspended out by the creek channel."

As Welcher notes, winter fish aren't going to run 20 feet to get a bait. So, if he starts at the bank and does not get a bite until the tree's outer end, he just happened to deflect off the limb where the fish was sitting. Chances are, most laydowns in the general area will deliver similar results.

Reading Florida's Early Spawn

Thanks to its southern latitudes, Florida gets a jump on the spawning season, and Elite pro Scott Martin urges anglers to not miss what can be a surprisingly early opening. Reading the weather, he said, is paramount.

"A lot of people don't know this, but in Lake Okeechobee, they'll spawn as early as October," said Martin, who won the 2024 Bassmaster Open on Okeechobee in early February. "It's all about water temperature, but you need some of that cool, crisp air to move in.

"If it's still hot and muggy like it is in September, it's no good. You want those mornings where you step outside and say, 'I feel a little fall in the air.'"

The key, Martin said, is getting a few mild "wind" fronts — not cold fronts that dramatically drop water temperatures. These cycles of south wind and north wind flush the marsh of warm, stagnant water and replace it with vibrant, oxygenated main-lake water.

"That time of the year, the first big cold front of the year really does a number on those fish, and you obviously don't want to be fishing for bed fish," Martin said. "Also, a super-big hot trend can [stall] the fish."

Photo: Dalton Tumblin

This "preseason" bonus can be fickle and elusive, but once that move starts, you can win big with the early spawn jackpot.

Calling Their BLUFF

New York pro Jamie Hartman agrees that one or two bites can be misleading during cold weather. Photo: Seigo Saito

The Hot Hand: Queen expects a sunny warming trend to send bass to brushpiles, rocks and other bottom structure where they tuck close to avoid sunlight. Here, he'll throw a Queen Tackle Hammer Shake — a rattling tungsten shaky head — with a Zoom Trick Worm, Zoom Speed Worm or Zoom Speed Craw or a Queen Tackle Flipping Jig with a Zoom Salty Pro Chunk.

"I'll throw past the brushpile, watch my bait go down and then bring it to the brushpile, bring it over it and make the bait fall on the other side," Queen said. "Ninety percent of the time, if you can do that, you'll catch the fish that's in it."

Welcher firmly believes that photo period exerts the greatest seasonal influence, so winter fish are still winter fish, even with a little shot of pleasant weather. It's probably more important for fishermen than fish, so Welcher cautions against complacency.

"Your mentality needs to be that it's still a grind and you're trying to piece together the puzzle every single day," he said. "Just because you see warm, pretty weather and it looks like they should be biting, that doesn't mean that [is] going to be the case.

"You still have to go into it with an open mind, take in all the information you can and make adjustments and make decisions."

Catch Fish, Don't Be One

I wasn't planning on it, but the Kenny Rogers thing really does work here. Fact is, often to avoid getting played you gotta know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em.

Poker pros refer to inexperienced players as "fish," the vulnerable ones that are easily suckered into overcommitting and building a pot they'll never win. Bass are less manipulative, but misreading their moves can leave you busted.

"One of the biggest things is misreading fish on a bite or two bites and then thinking you have it, but you don't, so you continue what you're doing and it could be the complete wrong thing," Hartman said. "You might misread [retrieve preference], but also where the fish are positioned, whether shallow or deep.

"You might say, 'I caught that fish right on the bank, and now I have to beat the bank.' But that was just a misread; that was one fish. Or you might think you have them figured out in a certain depth, but you only catch one fish.

"In the wintertime, there's not always a clear reason why a fish may be [in a given scenario]. That's why it's so easy to be misled — it's so random."

Hartman's not dispelling the thought of establishing a replicable winter pattern, but considering the generally low bite frequency, he warns against leaping to conclusions. So, how do you tell? How many fish do you need to catch in a given scenario to call it a pattern?

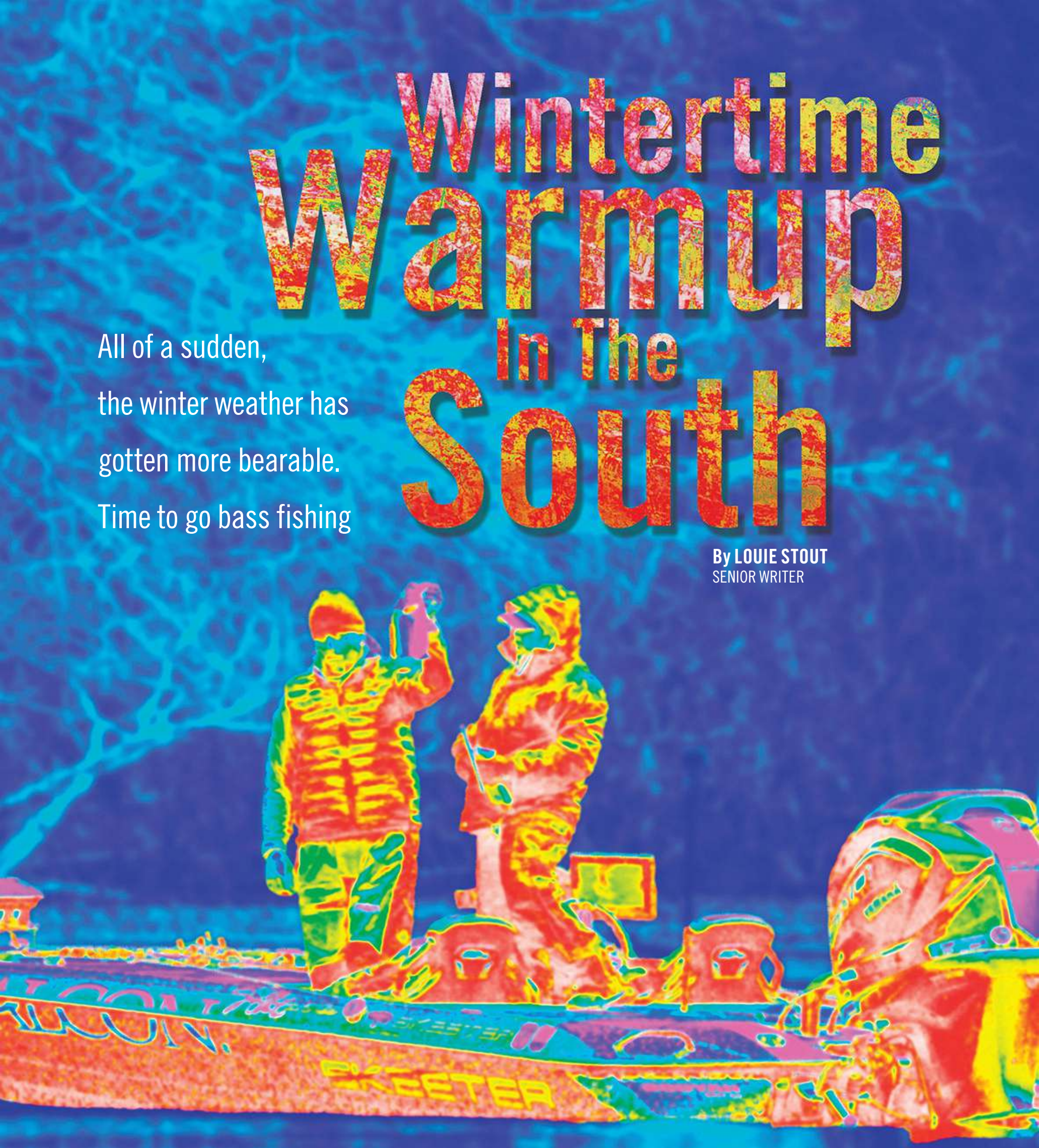
"It can be your gut, but don't get caught up; you gotta keep your options open," Hartman said. "Don't have a one-track mind. Even though you did catch a fish and you think you're getting clued in, just put that in the back of your mind. Until you catch multiple fish doing one thing, it's not a pattern."

Bottom Line: Bass don't understand betting, odds or card counting, but that doesn't mean they won't pull out every trick they know to avoid making your acquaintance. Winter's not an easy season, and they play to win. You'd better do the same.

Wintertime Warmup In The South

All of a sudden, the winter weather has gotten more bearable. Time to go bass fishing

By **LOUIE STOUT**
SENIOR WRITER



THOUGHTS OF FISHING often are diminished when wintertime cold weather locks in over the South.

And then you get that special day or two.

You know what I mean: An unseasonable warm front rolls in and those bone-chilling walks to the mailbox suddenly feel more akin to springtime.

Wintertime Warmup In The South

Oklahoma pro Jason Christie says fish were once harder to catch during warmups. But new technology has brought about changes. Photo: Kyle Jessie

Your mind shifts to your tackle and the boat you have stored away. You think about how warmups trigger bassin' activity during the spring and just know that somewhere on your favorite lake the bass are munchin'.

It's got to be the same scenario, right? The unseasonably warm spell and bright sunshine surely awaken winter bass from their lethargic state and have them prepping to spawn and eagerly stuffing their guts again.

Well, not exactly, say some of the Bassmaster Elite Series pros who have firsthand knowledge.

"Those kind of days make you feel like you want to go to the lake, but you have to ask yourself, 'How much has changed [in] the past 48 hours?'" says Alabama pro Gerald Swindle. "'Did that warm front really transition the fish to thinking about spawning and make them move shallow?'"

The answer, he adds, is no.

"That's the most confusing thing about wintertime for anglers," he explains. "Just because we feel good in that warm sunshine doesn't mean the fish have made any pronounced moves to where we think they should be."

In other words, you may think it's a good buzzbait day, but it's not, he adds.

Former Elite Series pro Bradley Hallman of Oklahoma concurs with Swindle's assessment.

"For the most part, those warm, winter days make us feel good, but they don't influence the bass that much," he says. "Believe me, I'm a bank beater by nature, but I've proven many times that those fish don't run to the bank."

That doesn't mean you can't catch them. The fish still have to eat, but generally not in the places where you think they should be or with the techniques you want to use.

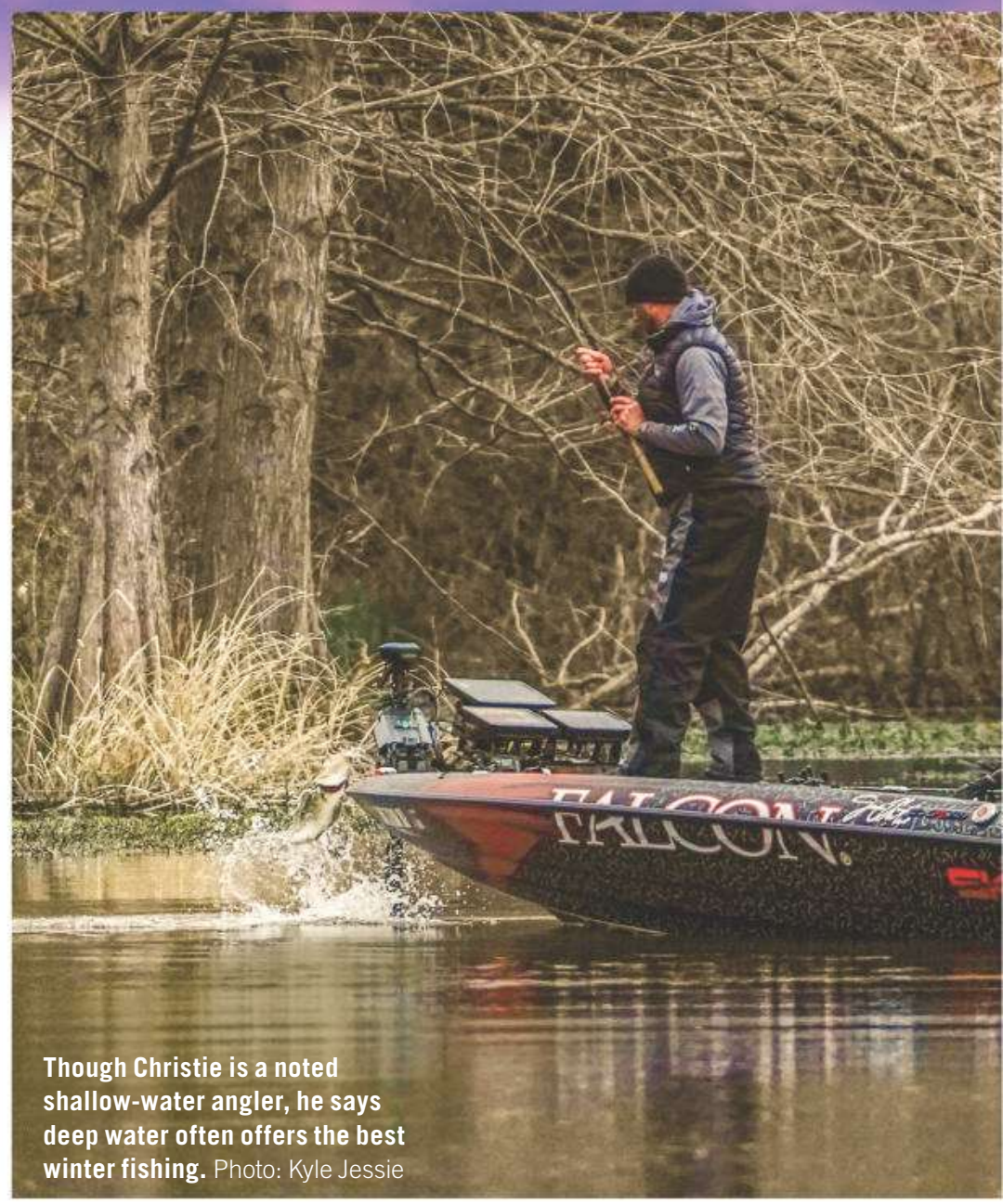
"The bass know it's still winter and aren't going to stray far from their wintering areas," Hallman explains. "I'm convinced they are a lot like deer when it comes to the rut; the shallow transition has more to do with length of daylight and angle of the sun than it does with actual air temperature."

After a warm day or two, Swindle says the fish will reposition near or over the same deeper water where they winter on most Southern lakes.

"They will move up and suspend in the water column to absorb that heat," he says. "That's where you have to rig a bait that falls slowly; I like the 1/4-ounce Buckeye Ballin' Out Jig with a Zoom Z Craw Jr.

"You need to give them time to see it and react. Remember, they typically aren't overly aggressive despite the warming trend. The upper layer of water may be warmer, but it's still cold where they are hanging out."

Buckeye Lures Ballin' Out Jig with Zoom Z Craw Jr.



Though Christie is a noted shallow-water angler, he says deep water often offers the best winter fishing. Photo: Kyle Jessie

At Smith Lake, he says, bass will move up in the water column around bluff banks. You might catch them down in 25 feet before the warm front but "after a few warm days, you pitch that shaky head in the same spot and it won't sink 3 feet before you get a bite."

The Tennessee River system, Swindle notes, is one place where they can get very shallow during a warm front.

"For example, on Guntersville they will sit in 8 to 9 feet of water and in the grass during winter, but if you get a sunny, warm day, they will go shallower behind the grass and sit with their bellies on the clay bottom that warms up fast. They won't move far from wintering areas. They will move shallower, but they won't go crazy. And they may or may not bite."

The best shallow fishing will be found on the main lake — not up the creeks or in the pockets — and on points or rock walls close to deep water.

Once, during the colder months, Swindle was filming with Rapala, one of his sponsors, and began fishing a shallow, hard spot on a Guntersville main-lake point.

"It was crazy; we probably caught 40 or 50 in less than a foot of water on a lipless crankbait and a DT6," he describes. "But we still had to fish them slowly."

In Oklahoma, Hallman targets those areas out of the current that offer vertical structure. That could be standing timber, a channel drop or a channel swing.

"That's where I find the better fish," he says. "The bass will be channel-oriented and around baitfish."

In his part of the country, the umbrella rig combined with forward-facing sonar produces some of the biggest fish of the year.

"The trophy hunters whom I know love this time of year," Hallman says. "They go out and target 10-pounders, which are not very common in our state," Hallman says. "But they catch 'em."

Spots Like It Warm

While most pros say that a wintertime warming trend has minimal impact on bass, Bassmaster Elite Series angler Marc Frazier says good things can happen when fishing for spotted bass.

"I really like it when it warms up," he insists. "I think it pulls bigger spotted bass to the bank. You can put together a really good stringer of spots on the Georgia lakes where I fish."

He says an angler can have a fun day during those unseasonable warmups by fishing shallow on lakes like Georgia's Lanier and West Point.

"Actually, there are a lot of fish to be had shallow all winter long," says Frazier. "Most guys are out there fishing the deeper areas and ditches, but I'm going down the bank catching them shallow."

Of course, he adds, those fish disappear when the water turns cold again.

During the warming period, Frazier targets banks that are a little steeper — banks where the boat is sitting in 12 to 14 feet of water but in a castable distance to the shoreline.

"I'm looking for those transitional shorelines not far from where they want to spawn but near deep water," he describes. "It's usually on the main river, near the mouth of a creek or the deepest channel swing on a main-lake pocket where there are plenty of rocks near shore."

He usually fishes a crankbait slowly over the rocks, opting for a Spro RkCrawler or a Spro Little John MD.

"That's probably my favorite way to catch them under those conditions," says Frazier.

Wintertime Warmup in the South

Alabama pro Gerald Swindle says not to let a warm front fool you during winter. The fish are likely still in their winter patterns and winter tactics are necessary. Photo: Seigo Saito

> **“Remember, they typically aren’t overly aggressive despite the warming trend.” – Gerald Swindle**

The Oklahoman says one of his favorite techniques for fishing lowland reservoirs on winter-day warmups is a throwback to yesteryear.

He’ll get over the deep fish and work a tailspinner, similar to the Mann’s Bait Co. Little George. He doesn’t remember the name of the ones he prefers, but he gets them through Academy Sports + Outdoors. Unlike the Little George, the line passes through the body of the one he likes and attaches to a treble hook.

“That thing is great because it gets deep quickly, and when you pick it up, that tail spins and it flutters back down, and that’s when they hit it,” he describes. “You can cover a lot of water with it.”

Like Hallman, fellow Oklahoman and Bassmaster Elite Series pro Jason Christie says forward-facing sonar has made winter fishing a lot easier for anglers.

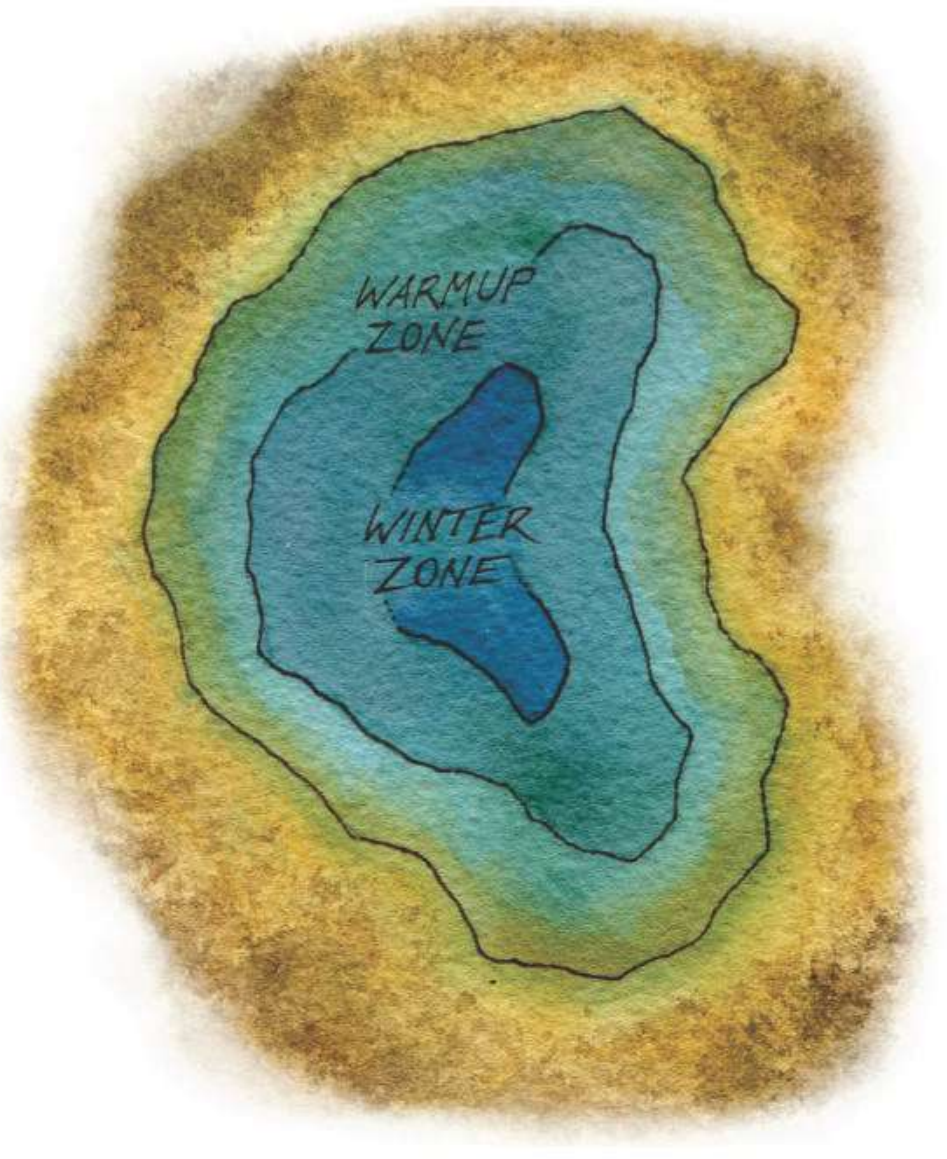
“Before LiveScope, the warmer days seemed to be tougher to find and catch big fish, but now with the new technology, it’s made it easier,” says Christie.

He says the fish tend to suspend and really aren’t in an eating mood. They just seem to move up where they can find the warmer water, relax and soak up the sun.

“With LiveScope, we can target those fish, but it’s still tough to get one to bite because he’s in a relaxed mode,” he says.

When there is little wind, he picks up the Yum FF Sonar Minnow that he used to win the 2022 Bassmaster Classic at Lake Hartwell.

“You need something real finesse-y, and [you] swim it over the fish’s head [to] make him bite,” he says.



It’s important to identify the different zones of the lake. Fish will hang out in one area when it’s extremely cold and move to another area when a warmup begins. Illustration: Jonathan H. Milo

“Oftentimes, they don’t want to bite, but if you work it over his head without spooking him, you can make him bite it.”

The 3-inch Sonar Minnow is fashioned on a 3/16-ounce Yum FF Sonar Jig with Sunline braid and an 8-pound Sunline fluorocarbon leader.

“I want to cast past the fish and let it fall, but always keeping it above his head,” Christie explains. “The first cast may come 3 feet over him, and subsequent casts will be a little closer. The fish will either bite or swim away. The key is to not spook him right away and give him a chance to see the bait.”

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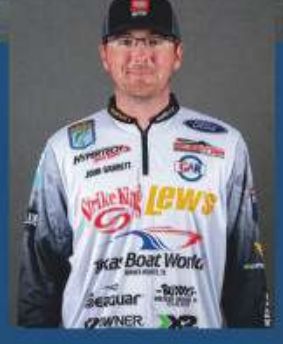
Day On The Lake

By **DON WIRTH** SENIOR WRITER

John Garrett

[Winter/Spring Transition]

DOTL Challenge: Put a Bassmaster Elite Series pro on a small lake he's never seen before. Give him seven hours to locate and catch bass while we log his every move



Date: March 7, 2024

Venue: Lake S, a flat-land reservoir

Water: 58 degrees, clear

Weather: Cloudy, windy, high of 65 degrees

Pro: John Garrett, 28, Union City, Tenn. While a member of the top-rated Bethel University bass squad, Garrett earned a berth in the 2017 Bassmaster Classic by winning the 2016 Bassmaster College Series Classic Bracket. He qualified for the 2024 Elite Series by finishing second in the 2023 Tackle Warehouse Bassmaster Elite Qualifiers division of the 2023 Bassmaster Opens.

Boat: Skeeter FXR21 with 250-horsepower Yamaha outboard, Minn Kota trolling motor and shallow-water anchors and Humminbird and Garmin electronics

6:52 a.m. John Garrett grinds a bladed jig around a shallow cove. Photo: Don Wirth

Strike King KVD Elite 300 Deep Jerkbait

ELITE SERIES ROOKIE John Garrett lives just a short cast from Reelfoot Lake, the fabled northwest Tennessee fishery formed by a series of earthquakes in the early 1800s. Kind of ironic that over two centuries later the entire sport of bass fishing is undergoing a seismic event of its own: Forward-facing sonar (FFS) has exploded onto the scene, pulling the top Elite Series competitors offshore, where few bass anglers had ventured previously. While this fish-finding technology is undeniably potent, it's also causing major controversy among B.A.S.S. members — many dismiss it as "video game fishing." How does Garrett feel about FFS? "Like most bass anglers, I grew up casting spinnerbaits and flipping jigs to shallow cover and absolutely love that style of fishing, but I've had to incorporate FFS into my arsenal in order to compete on the pro tour," he says. To those anglers who diss FFS as boring to watch on TV at best and the piscatorial equivalent of spotlighting deer at worst, Garrett points out that the technology has contributed exponentially to our knowledge of bass behavior. "Before FFS, most anglers never realized that a great many bass live much of their lives offshore and may seldom venture shallow, even to spawn. Also, before FFS, every cast you made was basically an educated guess — you threw a squarebill crankbait at a laydown because you figured a bass should be there, not because you knew it was there. FFS virtually eliminates blind casting — now you can wait until you actually see a fish, then cast to it." Garrett acknowledges that while some pros have taken FFS "over the top" with multiple transducers, giant screens and such, he insists that "a basic FFS setup would be a great learning tool for any weekend bass fisherman by revealing how bass use the entire lake, not just the shoreline." So, how and where will this charismatic Elite Series rookie find bass on a mystery lake during the challenging winter/spring transition? You're about to find out!

6:14 a.m. It's cloudy, windy and 56 degrees when we arrive at the deserted Lake S boat launch. Garrett readies his arsenal of Lew's baitcasting and spinning outfits for battle; he'll fish Strike King lures exclusively. "I expect bass to be in a typical prespawn pattern — some fish are probably staging offshore adjacent to sheltered spawning bays and coves, while others have already moved up shallow. I'll start off using my electronics to locate fish offshore around main-lake points, then gradually work my way shallower."

7:03 a.m. Garrett's rod bends as a good fish nails his jerkbait. Photos: Don Wirth

7:03 a.m. Garrett used forward-facing sonar and a Strike King jerkbait to bag his first keeper bass of the day, a 3-5 largemouth.

7 HOURS LEFT

- **6:30 a.m.** We launch the Skeeter. Garrett checks the water: It's 58 degrees and clear. "I'm loving this water clarity; it's perfect for jerkbaits and jighead minnows, my two favorite lure styles for offshore bass."
- **6:39 a.m.** Garrett idles toward a nearby point, drops his electric motor and begins slow-trolling in a lazy S pattern, watching his FFS screen for blips indicating fish. "It feels like February out here! That east wind is brutal!" He spots a school of shad on the screen, casts a 5-inch Arkansas shiner 3X Z-Too soft jerkbait rigged on a 3/16-ounce jighead to the school, then watches the baitfish scatter as the lure drops through them. "I'm hoping I can find some good fish up shallow today; otherwise, I'll have a sore neck if I have to keep my head buried in the FFS screen all day!"
- **6:43 a.m.** Garrett scopes a giant baitfish school and several scattered brushpiles off the point. "But I'm not seeing any bass around either the cover or the bait."
- **6:46 a.m.** Garrett moves toward a steep channel bank and casts the jighead minnow to an isolated brushpile with fish suspended nearby. "They're probably crappie."
- **6:52 a.m.** The wind is howling as Garrett grinds a 1/2-ounce green pumpkin Thunder Cricket bladed jig with a matching Menace Grub trailer parallel to a seawall. A bass nips the lure but doesn't hook up.
- **6:59 a.m.** Garrett transitions to a rocky point and casts a shad/chartreuse KVD Elite 300 Deep Jerkbait to suspended baitfish.
- **7:03 a.m.** Garrett 'Scopes a good fish near the baitfish school and twitches the jerkbait above it. The fish darts up and grabs the lure; his first keeper bass of the day weighs 3 pounds, 5 ounces. "This fish was suspended 4 feet deep in 15 feet of water around that shad school. Check out how long it is! It looked way bigger on FFS."
- **7:13 a.m.** Back to 'Scoping open water off the point. "I'm seeing a lot of small stuff, probably crappie."
- **7:18 a.m.** Upon locating several sunken brushpiles, Garrett Neko rigs a redbug-colored, 6.5-inch 3X finesse worm on a No. 1 Owner Sniper hook. "This is basically a wacky worm with a nail weight. It's deadly around brushpiles."
- **7:22 a.m.** He probes sunken shrubbery adjacent to a boathouse with the finesse worm.
- **7:26 a.m.** Garrett chunks the Thunder Cricket to the boathouse. No love there.
- **7:28 a.m.** Garret moves 20 yards off the bank and bags his second keeper, 2-2, on the 300 Deep Jerkbait. "I 'Scoped this fish near a brushpile."

6 HOURS LEFT

- **7:30 a.m.** He moves to a chunk-rock bank and catches a short fish off a dock on the jerkbait.
- **7:33 a.m.** Garrett pitches the Thunder Cricket to the dock. "I should probably move back offshore, but I really hate that cold wind out there!"

7:33 a.m. Garrett pitches a bladed jig to a dock.

10:26 a.m. Garrett catches a 2-6 off a brushy point on a finesse worm.

◗ **7:41 a.m.** Garrett has cranked a long seawall with the Thunder Cricket. “I’m surprised I haven’t caught anything up shallow yet. The water isn’t that cold.”
◗ **7:43 a.m.** He pitches the finesse worm around a series of boathouses. “I’d be more confident about fishing these docks if the sun were out.”
◗ **7:45 a.m.** Garrett switches to flipping a green pumpkin Rage Bug creature bait around the docks; it’s Texas-rigged with a pegged 3/8-ounce sinker and a 4/0 Owner hook.
◗ **7:51 a.m.** Garrett moves to the middle of a nearby cove, scopes a shad school and tries a shad-colored KVD 300 Jerkbait around the baitfish. “This is a shallower-diving jerkbait than that other one.”
◗ **8:05 a.m.** Garrett flips another dock with the Rage Bug. “There should be a few big fish around these docks.”
◗ **8:17 a.m.** Garrett moves back to the middle of the cove with the shallow jerkbait. “I’m only seeing small stuff on FFS. I need a big bite!”
◗ **8:24 a.m.** Garrett idles to the middle of a large tributary and tries a blue glimmer 3X Baby Z-Too soft jerkbait on 3/16-ounce jighead around a shad school. “This should work better than the 5-inch Z-Too in these cold conditions.”

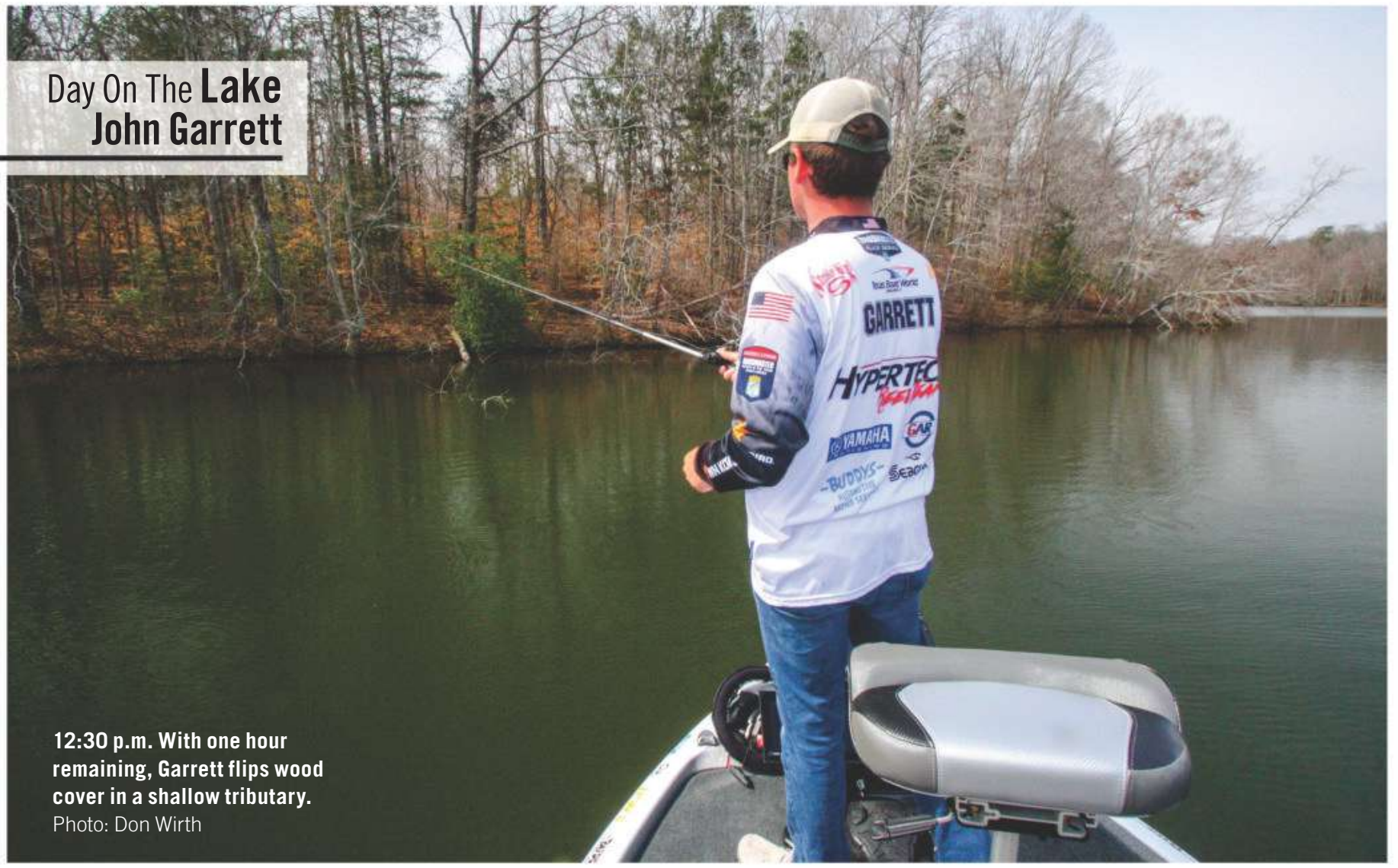
5 HOURS LEFT

◗ **8:30 a.m.** Garrett shakes the finesse worm around a 15-foot brushpile.
◗ **8:34 a.m.** Garrett casts the Baby Z-Too to the brushpile and catches his third keeper, 1 pound, 1 ounce. “They’re getting smaller! That’s not a good trend.”
◗ **8:46 a.m.** Garrett catches keeper No. 4, 1 pound, 4 ounces, near a shad school on the Baby Z-Too.
◗ **8:57 a.m.** Garrett is ’Scoping a channel drop in the middle of the tributary arm, targeting fish suspended around shad schools. “I’m still seeing mostly small stuff on FFS.”
◗ **9:08 a.m.** Garrett ’Scopes a good fish suspended over the channel drop. He jerks the 300 Deep Jerkbait near the fish; it races to the bottom. “Dang! I didn’t mean to scare it! I’m convinced they can feel the pulses from these powerful FFS transducers. Once everybody has FFS, the fish may become too spooky to catch!”
◗ **9:14 a.m.** Garrett watches a good fish follow the 300 Deep Jerkbait and then reject it. “They’re super-tentative today. Must be that east wind.”
◗ **9:18 a.m.** Garrett exits the big tributary and moves to a smaller creek arm, where he tries the Thunder Cricket on a sloping bank.
◗ **9:22 a.m.** He flips the Rage Bug to a submerged stump. A fish taps the bait; Garrett swings and misses.
◗ **9:28 a.m.** Garrett skips the finesse worm beneath an overhanging tree and gets another short strike. “Those last two bites were probably bluegill.”

4 HOURS LEFT

◗ **9:30 a.m.** Garrett exits the creek and moves back offshore. His FFS locates a big school of fish suspended over a channel drop. He casts the Baby Z-Too to the school and catches a slab crappie.
◗ **9:32 a.m.** Another cast, another big crappie. “I wish I had a fryer on board! Those are stud crappie!”
◗ **9:34 a.m.** Garrett catches a 10-inch bass off the channel drop.
◗ **9:36 a.m.** He catches keeper No. 5, 1 pound even, off the drop on the Baby Z-Too. “It’s pretty sad when you’re catching crappie bigger than your keeper bass, but at least I’ve got my limit.”

Day On The **Lake** **John Garrett**



12:30 p.m. With one hour remaining, Garrett flips wood cover in a shallow tributary.
Photo: Don Wirth

◗ **9:41 a.m.** Garrett moves shallower and catches his sixth keeper, 1 pound, off a stump on the Rage Bug. No culling here.

◗ **9:49 a.m.** Garrett has been shaking the finesse worm around a bass near a 15-foot brushpile, but the fish is in a stupor. What's his take on the day so far? "With the water temp in the upper 50s, I was hoping to find bass closer to the bank today because that's my preferred style of fishing, but apparently they haven't moved shallower yet. They appear to still be in a late-winter pattern, suspended offshore around baitfish, and they've been very finicky about biting. I'll probably split my remaining time between nosing around offshore and hitting docks and shallow cover in hopes that some big fish will eventually [move] up."

◗ **10 a.m.** Garrett is two castlengths off a sloping bank, looking for targets on FFS. He pinpoints a big fish near a submerged stump; it swims up to check out his finesse worm, then returns to its lair.

◗ **10:13 a.m.** Garrett retrieves a Rayburn red-colored Red Eyed Shad lipless crankbait across a submerged rockpile but hauls water.

◗ **10:22 a.m.** Garrett moves to a long clay point and crawls the finesse worm around scattered brushpiles.

◗ **10:26 a.m.** A bass grabs the finesse worm near a brushpile. Garrett swings aboard his seventh keeper, 2 pounds, 6 ounces.

3 HOURS LEFT

◗ **10:30 a.m.** Garrett's FFS shows a bass suspended off the end of the point. He jerks the 300 Deep around the fish; it rushes the bait, then turns away. "These suckers are moody today!"

◗ **10:36 a.m.** He winds the Red Eyed Shad across the point, hangs it in a deep stump and breaks it off.

◗ **10:41 a.m.** Garrett drags a 3/4-ounce green pumpkin/brown football jig with a matching Rage Craw trailer around scattered stumps on the point.

◗ **10:49 a.m.** Garrett moves offshore, bypassing smaller fish in hopes of 'Scoping a big bass. The sun is trying to break through the dense cloud cover. "A little sunshine might help get these fish out of their funk!"

◗ **11:04 a.m.** Garrett moves back to the point and catches a 1-3 keeper on the Baby Z-Too.

◗ **11:14 a.m.** Garrett idles uplake to a series of flats and shallow pockets, where he casts the Rage Craw to stumps and laydowns.

◗ **11:21 a.m.** Garrett's FFS detects a big fish at the edge of a 9-foot ditch. He tempts the bass with the 300 Deep Jerkbait, but it swims away. He enters the waypoint in his GPS. "I might have to check on that fish again later."

2 HOURS LEFT

◗ **11:30 a.m.** Continuing along the ditch, Garrett hangs a bass on the finesse worm; it runs into some submerged brush and comes unbuttoned.

◗ **1:38 a.m.** Garrett scopes a good fish near a stump. He pitches the wacky worm to the fish, but a tiny bass shoots out of nowhere and grabs it. "Greedy little knothead!"

◗ **11:44 a.m.** The 300 Deep Jerkbait snares Garrett's ninth keeper, 1-15, off the ditch.

◗ **Noon.** Garrett moves back to the clay point he fished earlier and drags the football jig. "I'm seriously needing a big fish!"

◗ **12:11 p.m.** The skies have cleared, the wind has died, and it's warming up rapidly as Garrett moves farther off the point with the 300 Deep Jerkbait.

◗ **12:18 p.m.** He catches a 1-2 off a shad school on the 300 Deep.

12:23 p.m. Garrett casts the jerkbait to a big fish above the shad school; it moves toward the lure, but the bait's hooks tangle in his line, spooking the fish. "Awww, man, I hate when that happens!"

1 HOUR LEFT

12:30 p.m. Garrett moves into a nearby shallow creek arm and flips the Rage Bug around shoreline wood cover.

12:48 p.m. Having flipped his way to the back of the creek, Garrett moves to the opposite shore, where he hits several boathouses with the finesse worm. No takers here, either.

12:52 p.m. Garrett runs to open water at the creek's mouth and tries the 300 Deep Jerkbait around a 12-foot brushpile.

1:04 p.m. Garrett has speed-trolled to the middle of the lake, where he's 'Scoping a 30-foot channel for signs of life. Not much out here, either.

1:16 p.m. With Garrett's time nearly running out, he races to a big main-lake boathouse and hammers "every square inch of it" with the finesse worm and creature.

1:30 p.m. Time's finally up! It's been a grind on Lake S for Garrett today, but he's managed to catch 10 decent keepers. His five biggest fish weigh 11 pounds.

The Day In Perspective

"These fish were definitely behind schedule today," Garrett told *Bassmaster*. "With the lake temp nearing 60 degrees, I expected them to be in a prespawn mode, either in or close to shallow water. But most of the bass were offshore around shad schools and scattered brushpiles, a typical winter pattern, and they were very reluctant to bite. If I were to fish here tomorrow, I'd stick to the lower, deeper part of the lake and focus more on fishing the bottom with a Carolina rig and a heavy jig."

WHERE AND WHEN JOHN GARRETT CAUGHT HIS FIVE BIGGEST BASS

1. 3 pounds, 5 ounces; Strike King KVD Elite 300 Deep Jerkbait (shad/chartreuse); baitfish school off point; 7:03 a.m.
2. 2 pounds, 2 ounces; same lure as No. 1; submerged brushpile; 7:28 a.m.
3. 1 pound, 4 ounces; Strike King Baby Z-Too soft jerkbait (blue glimmer) on 3/16-ounce jighead; shad school; 8:46 a.m.
4. 2 pounds, 6 ounces; Strike King 6.5-inch finesse worm (redbug) with nail weight on No. 1 Owner Sniper hook; brush on point; 10:26 a.m.
5. 1 pound, 15 ounces; same lure as No. 1; ditch in upper end; 11:44 a.m.

TOTAL: 11 POUNDS

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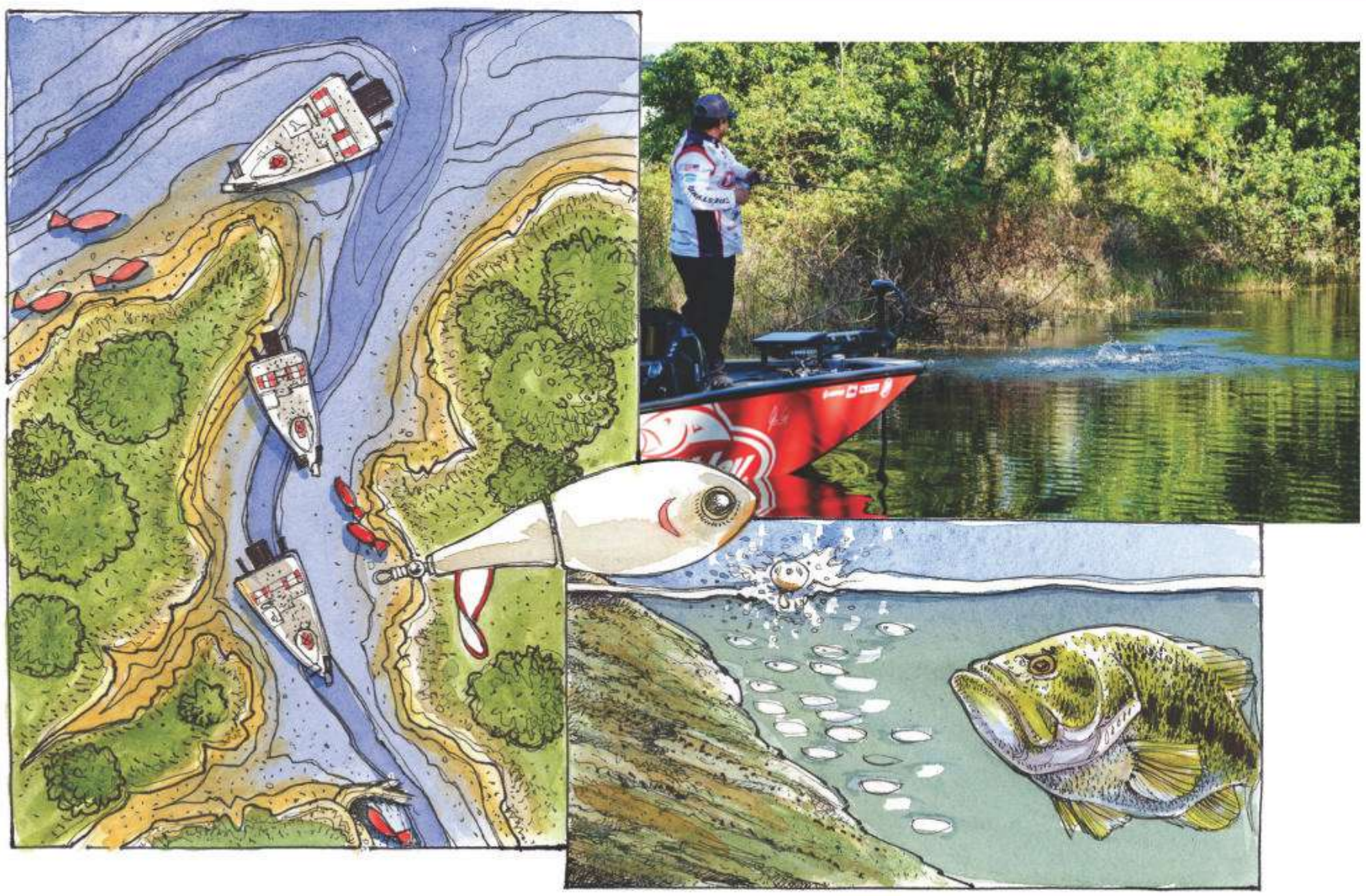


The Winter Topwater Bite Is Not A Myth

John Cox has a trick for boating winter bass that almost any angler can master in just a few hours of time

Identifying seasonal zones is crucial. Bass will spend time in certain areas of the lake when the weather is at its coldest and then move to new zones when it starts to warm up for spring. Illustrations: Doug Schermer; Photo: Chase Sansom

For more than a decade, John Cox has found himself in the Ozark Mountains in early winter. While holiday memories fade and a new tournament season looms, Cox and his family make an annual pilgrimage from his home in Florida into the rocky, rolling mountains of Arkansas and Missouri. There, he typically shakes down a new boat and makes time to spend a final few precious weeks with his family before the season kicks off.

Surrounded by some of the nation's finest highland reservoirs but short on time, Cox deploys a pattern for anglers who have just a few short hours to spend on the water. "A day on the water is better than a day doing almost anything else," he says. "But sometimes in the middle of getting ready for another season, I don't have a lot of time to fish."

Enter the solution: a pattern that he can fish with just one bait and two target areas. To begin, Cox launches his boat and makes a beeline to the steep bluffs and shallow feeder creeks that line lakes like Table Rock and Lake of the Ozarks. "I normally only have a few hours," Cox says. "But the nice part is, there's really no rush to get there. This bite seems like it's better in the dead middle of the day."

Conveniently, this pattern gives winter anglers an excuse to prioritize fishing during the warmest hours of the day while also maximizing their odds at boating more bass. Cox cautions that this is not necessarily a pattern for personal-best trophy bass. However, it is a pattern that is well-suited to making memories with friends and family and making the most of short daylight hours in January and February.

To do so, Cox unfurls a unique topwater setup: a spinning combo mated to a pint-sized topwater with a jointed, propeller tail, the Berkley Choppo 90. The Choppo provides an alternative to traditional walking-style topwater baits.

While the bait can be used with a baitcaster, Cox says its diminutive stature lends itself to spinning gear. Presentation is as simple as it gets. "You're just throwing it out and straight

[Tackle Tips]

Rod: 7-foot, 1-inch medium-heavy Fenwick HMG
Reel: Abu Garcia Zenon X 3000
Line: 8-pound Berkley FireLine Braid

[The Pro]

John Cox
Total B.A.S.S. tournaments: 93
Total career weight: 3,183 pounds, 11 ounces
Total career earnings: $791,146
Highest finish: First place, 2019 Basspro.com Eastern Open at Chickamauga Lake

"The nice part is, there's really no rush to get there. This bite seems like it's better in the dead middle of the day."

retrieving it. It's not very technical. You can do it on pretty much any equipment, and it's enjoyable."

In milder weather, Cox begins at the bluffs, where steep dropoffs typically house bass that can be holding in deeper water alongside bait pushed against the cliffs. In colder weather, he aims for creeks, where his weapon of choice is likely to conjure a strike near the bank in less than 3 feet of water. "Bluffs can be on the main lake," he says. "Usually, you are just working your way down the edge of them. Bass will be pushing shad up against those bluffs to feed, so depth doesn't really matter. In the creeks, you're trying to get to the back of them. You're throwing in less than 3 feet of water, aiming right at the bank. Reel it past any stick, point or piece of wood."

When reeled, the Choppo's tail propeller creates a burble that not only draws in the eyes of lurking bass, but also doubles as a metronome that anglers can use to pace their retrieve. On spinning tackle, the small bait is capable of long, distant casts that allow him to keep the boat well away from the target zones — usually banks and any type of wood, rock or brush. "What I love about this bait is that you are seeing it on the top," he adds. "It's like fishing a buzzbait. You're almost holding your breath with each cast — at least I am — because there's an anticipation that something is going to hit at any second."

Winter months have garnered a reputation for producing softer, less furious bites than anglers might find during the spring, but Cox says some of his most explosive hits this time of year come on a topwater.

Expect quick, aggressive strikes that rely on the Choppo's duo of treble hooks to do the dirty work. "Once they hit, they are usually hooked," he adds. "But mistakes to avoid are things like reeling it too fast. Sometimes, this time of year, you can tell it's too fast. You almost want to give the fish time to hear it, to come up and then react. So, you need a nice, steady and easy retrieve to produce a hit."

And hit they do. Though Cox often deploys this pattern in the winter, he recalls winning the 2016 Forrest Wood Cup using the Choppo. Likewise, he remembers boating dozens of bass in just over an hour on a small lake in New York's Adirondack Mountains with his wife and kids one summer. "That one really pops out in my mind," he adds. "Melissa and I were vacationing around with the kids. We were only able to go fish for about an hour, and we had one Choppo tied on. Before the hour was over, we were all throwing one and those fish were hitting in all directions."

Replicate this shallow-water master's methods, and you too could be boating bass in between extracurricular activities this winter. Even better, it's a pattern worth mastering to keep in your back pocket year-round. ◗

[Weather]

Perfect

Gray winter days with a slight drizzle at the beginning of a front present perfect conditions for fishing the Choppo. Keep an eye out for cool (but not cold) days where fish should be feeding in advance of a weather front. This may require trusting your local TV weatherman — which is a definite gamble. But it can be worth it.

Worth A Shot

Days at the beginning of a warming trend or just before the onset of colder weather can still prove fruitful. Clouds are a great ally here, but partly sunny conditions should not adversely affect the bite much.

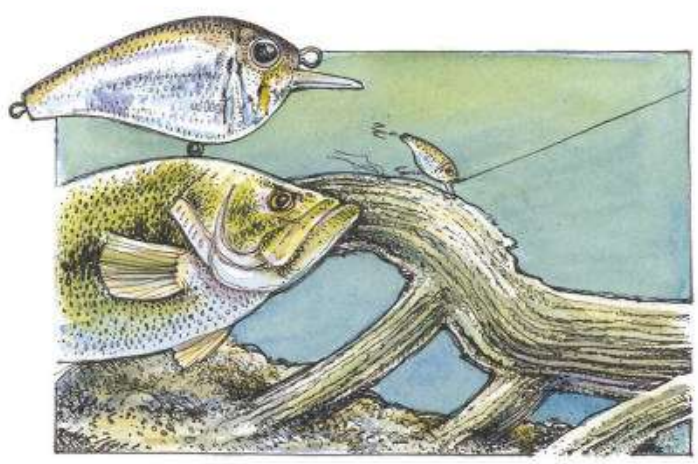
Change It Up

Avoid stagnant, post-frontal days with bluebird skies and motionless water. John Cox says bitterly cold weather early in the morning can also shut fish down. Looking for bright spots through the gloom makes you a trooper, but don't beat your head against the wall.

[On Deck]

When John Cox knows he's around fish but the Choppo is not triggering a strike, he switches to another cast-and-retrieve bait: the Berkley Frittside. This shallow-diving crankbait designed by Bassmaster legend David Fritts is a fan favorite among tournament anglers and weekend warriors for a reason. "I throw it at the exact same places," Cox says. "But the trick is to use 15-pound [Berkley] Trilene fluorocarbon. It has less stretch compared to many other fluorocarbons, and, to me, it's the closest thing to having as little stretch as braid."

Cox says a herring color scheme gives the bait a flashy, green glint when working through the water. He pairs the bait with a 7-foot, 6-inch medium-heavy Abu Garcia John Cox Pro Series Crankbait Rod and a 6.4:1 Abu Garcia Zenon baitcaster.



[Triple Threat] By DAVID A. BROWN Senior Writer

If You Go In The Snow

White stuff on the ground is intimidating to some, but the bass still have to eat

Water type: Southern highland reservoir
Water temp: High 40s to low 50s
Clarity: 4 to 5 feet
Depth: 5 to 40 feet
Structure: Bluffs, deep rock, bridges
Cover: Deep docks, overhanging trees
Forage: Shad, bluegill
Weather: Bitter cold and snow on the way
Wind/current: Calm morning with afternoon wind increasing
Experts: A trio of Elite Series pros explain how they address those shivering days

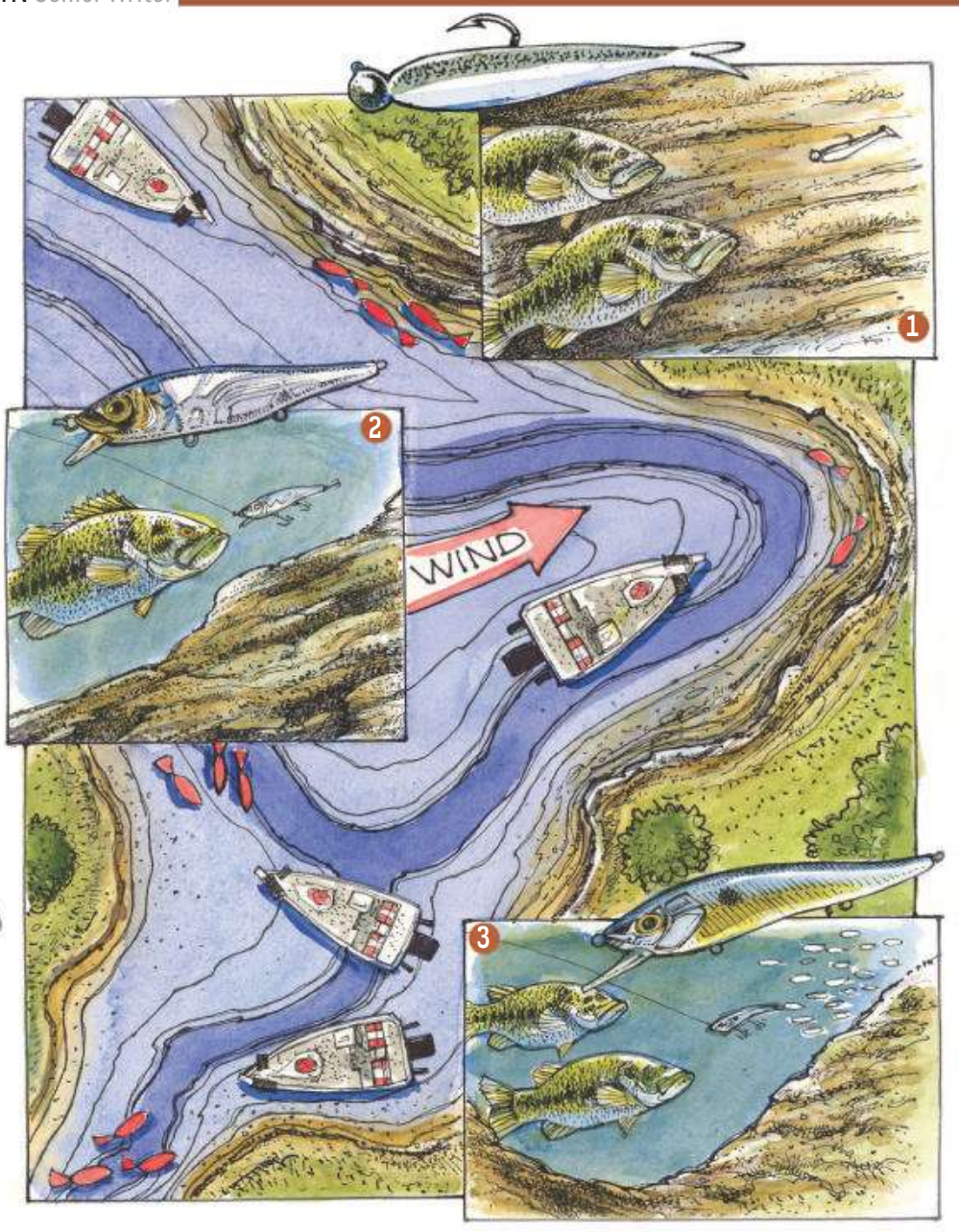


Illustration: Doug Schermer

1 MEAL PREP

Will Davis Jr. Childersburg, Ala.
First move: Priority No. 1 is finding bait because bass will be feeding up for the spawn.

"Bass are good planners, so they want to be around the bait," Davis said. "The water is cold, so they're not wanting to burn a lot of energy looking for food."
Baits/tackle to use: For open-water, live-sonar work, Davis uses a Big Bite Baits Jerk Minnow in a shad color with a 1/4- to 3/8-ounce Davis Bait Co. Scope Head. For steeper banks, he switches to a Spro McStick jerkbait in clear chartreuse, matte shad or ghost Table Rock.
Angle/boat position: Davis likes to parallel the banks with the jerkbait because he can cover water efficiently.

"I can keep that bait in the strike zone longer than if I'm pulling up and casting straight in toward the bank," he said. "On a parallel cast, I can be in that strike zone the whole cast."
What to key on: Davis stresses one key point: Don't assume deep. He said he's caught fish shallow on a squarebill when there was ice around the edges.

2 WIND WISDOM

Jake Whitaker Fairview, N.C.
First move: Leveraging natural factors, Whitaker starts by determining wind speed and direction. This tees up the can't-miss opportunities.

"If you have some weather coming in, you'll have some wind, so I look for windy banks," he said. "Windy days push the bait around, so let the wind help you find the bait. Find the bait — find the fish."
Baits/tackle to use: For less-active bass, Whitaker throws a Bill Lewis Scope Stik jerkbait in pro blue. For active fish, he prefers an Alabama Rig with Big Bite Baits Pro Swimmers.
Angle/boat position: "I'm a good cast and a half away from the bank," he said. "A lot of times, those fish are not right on the bank; they're on that first dropoff."
What to key on: What pleases Whitaker most on a winter day? Finding a windward bank with a steeper angle.

"On those steeper banks, the fish don't have as far to go. They can be in deeper water and very quickly move up shallow to feed. I'm not looking at flats; I'm looking at channel-swing banks."

3 STAGE CRAFT

Trey McKinney Carbondale, Ill.
First move: Focusing first on finding winter staging areas, McKinney said he's carrying a high degree of optimism into a snowy day.

"You always hear the old-timers say that in the wintertime, snow can bring some of the best fishing you can have. You're always trying to find that one winter day when they unlock, and snow can really make 'em bite."
Baits/tackle to use: In open water, he uses a deep-diving or suspending jerkbait. Around structure, he goes with a 3/8- to 1/2-ounce finesse ball-head jig with a chunk-style trailer.
Angle/boat position: When the fish are not in the mood to move long distances, the bait presentation angle is important. They're not often chasing this time of year.
What to key on: McKinney advises picking a historically dependable bay and then fishing around to check their mood. The fish may be hugging the main ditch, or they might prefer to head out to a deeper stretch.

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Watch Bassmaster action on FOX and FS1

B.A.S.S., FOX and FS1 have announced plans to expand Bassmaster's live coverage in 2025. The 2025 Bass Pro Shops Bassmaster Classic presented by Under Armour will now have six hours of broadcast coverage on FOX across Saturday and Sunday, as well as 54 hours of Elite Series coverage on Saturdays and Sundays featured on FS1 – with the potential for six additional hours on FOX each season.

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By KYLE JESSIE Executive Editor, Digital
JONATHAN H. MILO Illustrator

Flat-Sides Flat-Out Catch 'Em

1 [Put Your Crankbait On A Diet In Wintertime]

When bass are a little more lethargic in colder water, a flat-sided crankbait, with its tighter wobble, can be just the trick for making them bite.

Cold-Water Cranking

For those anglers that don't want to spend their time chasing suspended bass in the cold months of the year, a great alternative is putting a crankbait in your hands and getting to work. Most bodies of water will provide anglers an opportunity to catch bass on a crankbait during the wintertime and prespawn, but the bite will vary. For some lakes it's as simple as paralleling down rock banks, for others it could be a submerged grass bite. Either way, a crankbait, especially a flat-sided crankbait can be the ticket to getting bites.

Why A Flat-Sided Crankbait?

There are plenty of reasons as to why a flat-sided crankbait tends to outperform a round-body bait in cold water, but one of the main reasons is the tight wobble that a flat-sided bait produces. The bass become much more lethargic when the water is cold, and a flat-sided bait provides a much more subtle action while still displacing water. Additionally, a flat-side is much easier to retrieve at slower speeds. This is huge because lethargic wintertime bass are going to be less likely to react to a bait moving quickly.

Conditions Are Crucial

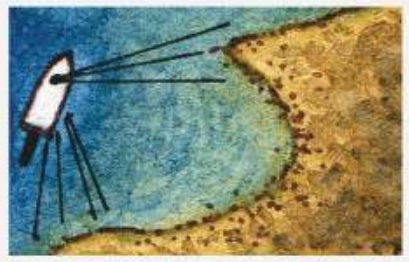
We as anglers would love it if cold-water bass would eat the paint off a crankbait each and every trip to the lake, but that's simply not the case. Each body of water is going to be a little different when it comes to the best times to throw a flat-sided crankbait. Like most reaction baits, a flat-side is often going to excel under low-pressure, overcast conditions with some wind. However, on some bodies of water the bass will sun on shallow rocks and stumps when the sun is up and the temperature rises.

2 [Where To Cast]

Most flat-sided crankbaits run medium to shallow depth, and making bottom contact with the baits is important in most cases.

Rock Banks

While a flat-side is not bound to just one type of body of water, having hard bottom is going to be the most ideal. For attacking these types of fisheries, try paralleling the bank and covering water. Remember bottom contact.



Shallow Points

Points are always great, even during the cold months, and a crankbait can be an effective bait to target them. Position the boat out off of the point and cast your flat-sided crankbait at a variety of different angles.

Submerged Stumps

Certain bodies of water will present an opportunity to get bites on shallow cover when the fish push shallow on warm days. Wood is a cover that will produce bites when this happens. Fishing around stumps and other wood cover is a great time to break out the balsa flat-sided bait because the buoyance makes the bait less likely to snag.

3 [Shopping List]

Though the difference between flat-sided crankbaits and more traditional models is subtle, a separate shopping list is required for your efforts to be successful.

A Strike King Hardliner Flat-Sided Crankbait

The Strike King Hardliner flat-sided crankbait looks a lot like an old-school flat-side. At 7/16-ounce, it's much easier to throw than a traditional balsa flat-side and provides greater durability. It will run in 5 to 7 feet, depending on your line size. ($8.99) **strikeking.com**

B Black Label Tackle Cliff Pace Hickster Balsa Crankbait

Handcrafted by Elite Series pro Cliff Pace, this flat-side has a tight wobbling action that entices bites from even the most sluggish of bass. The Hickster dives in the 3- to 5-foot range and is available in a number of different colors. ($17.99) **blacklabeltackle.com**

C Sunline Crank FC Fluorocarbon Line

Quality fluorocarbon line aids in throwing a flat-sided crankbait and helps you land fish. Sunline Crank FC has more stretch that helps anglers not pull the bait out of the bass' mouth. Sunline's Crank FC is available in sizes from 8 to 16 pounds. ($29.99) **sunlineamerica.com**

D VMC RedLine Series Finesse Treble Hooks

The last thing you want to have is unreliable hooks. VMC's RedLine Series Finesse Treble Hooks are P.T.F.E.-coated with a smaller diameter, which allows the hook to easily penetrate a fish's mouth. They are available in four sizes — 3, 4, 5 and 6. ($8.79) **rapala.com**

E Rapala OG Deep Tiny 7 Crankbait

The OG series has been a weapon during the winter for years, and the OG Deep Tiny 7 is particularly great when you need to get a little deeper. Equipped with high-quality components, the OG Deep Tiny 7 is ready to go right out of the package. ($11.59) **rapala.com**

F St. Croix Black Bass Glass Casting Rods

When casting a flat-sided crankbait for bass that aren't always super-aggressive, having a rod that has a soft tip with a moderate bend is critical. St. Croix's Black Bass Glass Casting rods have you covered at an affordable price. ($160-$165) **stcroixrods.com**

4 [Quick Tips]

Elite Series pro Chad Pipkens

You can catch bass on a flat-side throughout the year, but there are reasons why they really perform in cold water. One of the biggest advantages of a flat-side is that you can fish it incredibly slow. You can barely move the reel handle and it will still run correctly.

Elite Series pro Ray Hanselman

A flat-side will catch bass year-round, but, for me, when the water temperature is 55 degrees or less is when I'll really rely it. Once the water temperature dips below that point, you'll notice the fish are much more likely to react to a crankbait with a tighter wobble.

Elite Series pro Robert Gee

When the water temperature drops early in the year, a flat-side, especially a balsa one, is a great weapon. The subtleness of the bait triggers stingy bass when the water is super-cold. When the water is muddy, I shift to a flat-side with rattles.

Elite Series pro Kyle Norsetter

When I think about throwing a flat-sided crankbait in the winter or prespawn, one thing I always consider is finding riprap or rock around a bridge. These areas will produce a bite when things get tough. It is key to make bottom contact with a flat-sided crankbait, and doing so around riprap is a really easy, effective technique.

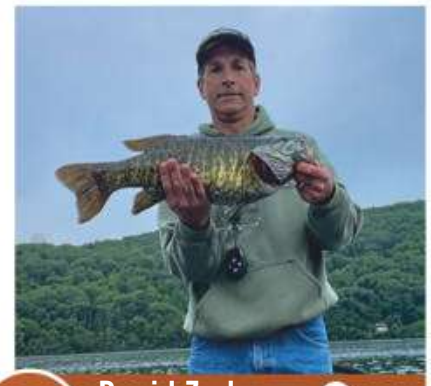
[Lunker Club]

Congratulations to the newest members of the Bassmaster Lunker Club™. Membership in the club is free and open to any B.A.S.S. member who catches a largemouth bass weighing 10 pounds or more, a spotted bass weighing 5 pounds or more, or a smallmouth bass weighing 6 pounds or more, from Jan. 1, 2024, to the present. New Lunker Club members will receive an official certificate with holder and a gift pack.

6-0 **Matthew Gunn** (1)
Lake Hartwell, South Carolina
Shaky head

10-12 **Brian Hopkins** (2)
Richland Chambers Res., Texas
Caraway Creek Needle Worm

5-5 **Bryson Dotson** (4)
Watts Bar Lake, Tennessee
1/2-ounce Rapala Freeloader



6-10 **David Zadrozny** (3)
Candlewood Lake, Connecticut
1/8-ounce Daredevil

11-2 **Gabriel Basham** (5)
Sam Rayburn Reservoir, Texas
1/2-ounce War Eagle spinnerbait

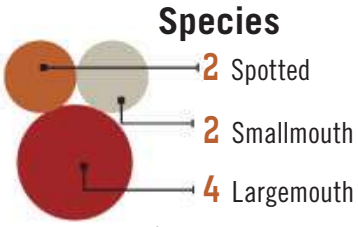
7-3 **Steven Niemi Jr.** (6)
Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin
Keitech Easy Shiner

11-2 **Marty Barbarich** (7)
Lake Holiday, Indiana
3/16-ounce Set The Hook Drop Shot

10-8 **Dennis Brown** (8)
Orange Lake, Florida
3 1/2-inch tungsten-pegged Gambler Why Not

[Trophy Trends]

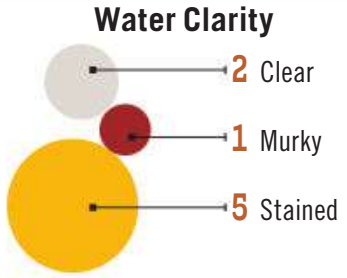
Species



Date Caught

February (1)
May (4) (6)
June (3) (5) (7) (8)
August (2)

Water Clarity



Weather Conditions

To request an application, write to editorial@bassmaster.com or B.A.S.S., The Lunker Club, 31 Inverness Center Parkway, Suite 600, Birmingham, AL 35242. A photo documenting the catch must be provided, along with the length and girth of the bass. Only suitable photos will be published in *Bassmaster* Magazine. We will only accept entries for bass that are released alive. View lunker photos and get your application online at Bassmaster.com/lunker-club.

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Some people scoff at kayak fishing these days because the once-primitive crafts are equipped with everything from trolling motors and depthfinders to shallow-water anchors and livewells.

Kayaks, people argue, were meant to go where other larger crafts can't go — and without the technological advances of the modern fishing world.

Those folks might be dismayed to see the two worlds blending so perfectly.

As is obvious in this photo of an unknown kayak angler disappearing into the Louisiana marsh during the Yamaha Rightwaters Bassmaster Kayak Series scored by TourneyX season finale on Caddo Lake and Lake Bistineau, kayaks can still go anywhere.

So, how cool is it to reach those once-unreachable places — and do so with all the equipment the big boys are using out on the big water?

Like everything else in fishing — everything else in the world, for that matter — kayak fishing is evolving.

What was once thought of as a sport for paddling quietly down a backwater river or stream still very much has those elements. You can still escape the crowds of ski boats, pontoon boats and Jet Skis. You can still go where only the sounds of nature invade your ears.

There should be no apologies for making that journey with a boatload of modern comforts. People only did it without them before because they had to.

Photo: Mark Cisneros

Celebrating The 20th

AS I GET older, time becomes slippery. For example, it's hard for me to grasp that it's been 35 years since I graduated high school. I remain a proud alumni of Klein High's class of 1989. Nobody had a cellphone. Home computers were rare. It would be 10 more years before the common man would even consider buying a laptop. Now, it's hard to imagine existing before iPhones, FaceTime and online shopping. So, when I realized that 2025 will mark the 20th season of the Bassmaster Elite Series, I pulled out my walker and pondered how much has changed within bass fishing's competitive landscape since the Elite concept was born in 2006.

I remember being in the room when the spark happened (my hair was black then). Jerry McKinnis, Dave Precht, Trip Weldon (all Bass Fishing Hall of Famers), as well as others, were sitting around the table. ESPN had recently purchased B.A.S.S. and wanted professional bass fishing to become the next NASCAR. After a long skull session, it was determined that big steps had to be taken to elevate the sport. First, bass boats needed to look cool ... like racecars. So, Elite Series pros would be mandated to wrap their boats. Secondly, Elite pros needed to look and act like professionals (a bigger ask than you might think back then). So, B.A.S.S. mandated a dress code and implemented a new code of conduct standard. And lastly, there needed to be big money to garner the attention of consumers and sponsors alike, as well as a smaller field of anglers. And this was a biggie. B.A.S.S. announced that entry fees would be $5,000 per tournament and that only 100 anglers would make up the Elite Series field (it's a lot easier to create stars of the sport with fewer anglers vying for the spotlight). Previously, entry fees were thousands of dollars less per event and more than 150 anglers were competing.

There was a big question mark as to whether 100 anglers would be willing to commit both financially and emotionally to the new concept. That question was answered when 106 anglers answered the call. Interestingly, 20 years later, nine of those anglers remain from the original roster (Greg Hackney, Gerald Swindle, Mike Iaconelli, Steve Kennedy, Mark Menendez, Randy Howell, John Crews, Bill Lowen and Bernie Schultz).

> **"There was a big question mark as to whether 100 anglers would be willing to commit both financially and emotionally."**

To help wrap your mind around the year 2006, remember that Facebook and Twitter were not yet a thing, Vice President Dick Cheney shot a guy while hunting and Saddam Hussein was executed for crimes against humanity. Yes, it was that long ago.

Although these changes reimagined the professional level of bass fishing, more modifications were spawned through the Elite Series in the years that followed. In the early days of the Elites, the pros were still fishing with co-anglers. Eventually, B.A.S.S. announced the Marshal program and Elite anglers had the entire boat to themselves. In the early days of the Elites, competitors fished out of B.A.S.S. sponsor boats on the final day. Eventually, this changed and anglers fished out of their own boats every day of Elite Series events.

It's cool to see how many of the decisions made two decades ago have influenced what bass fishing looks like today. Had B.A.S.S. not created the Elite Series, I doubt junior high anglers would be wearing jerseys and college bass fishing teams would have wrapped boats.

So, 2025 will be a yearlong celebration of not only the Elite Series, but how the original concept has transformed bass fishing. As a fan of the sport, it will be fun to look back on the evolution of competition, even though, in my mind, the seismic changes seemed to have happened just yesterday.

Johnny Morris

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